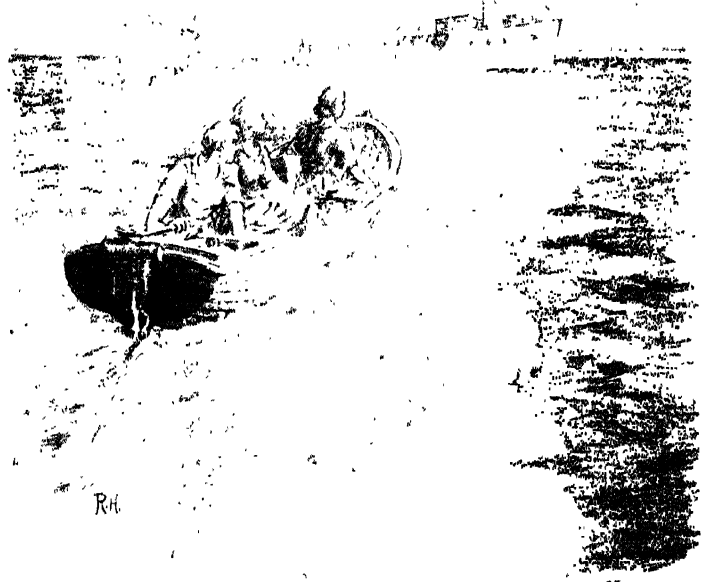


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PERMITTING

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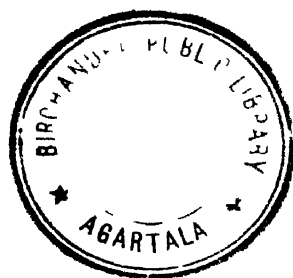
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WIND AND WEATHER
PERMITTING

With drawings by
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CHAPTER I

NO AWFUL AUNTS

CLANG! clang! clang! The tea bell rang through the hot sleepy afternoon, but, apparently, the three children down at the creek did not hear it; each was absorbed in his or her occupation.

The Grange family had come down from London a fortnight ago to the house they had just built on Shale Island by a creek. It looked out over the flat harbour, standing a field's distance from one of the mud creeks which wound inland through salt marshes, and their land was safeguarded from the sea by a low sloping cement wall with a clay bank and a dyke behind. At high tide the water lapped against this wall, and at low tide the creek emptied, leaving vast expanses of mud.

When the bell rang, Michael, aged fifteen, was working half naked on an upturned dinghy. After a few minutes he put down his tools, stood up, and stretched. Then, shading his eyes, he looked out over the water and across the marshes toward the harbour.

His two sisters, Pat, aged twelve, and Sally, aged sixteen, had made no move; Pat because she was lazily enjoying the heat and the gentle rocking of the dinghy in which she was lying with a large straw hat over her face, and Sally because she was trying to persuade a sea anemone to attach itself to the inside of the glass jar she was holding, instead of the stone on which she had found it.

Michael watched her for a few seconds, and then he put two fingers to his mouth and shattered the hot

silence with a noise like the shriek of an engine's whistle.

Immediately the dinghy in the middle of the creek rocked violently and Pat stood up.

'Teal' bawled Michael. Pat slipped off her cotton frock, dived overboard, and made for the shore, leaving the little boat dancing about in a surprised way on the water.

Sally went on working for a minute. The anemone was hanging on to the stone by a tiny piece of skin. Gently edging this off, she slipped the creature into the jar. It sank to the bottom, and holding up the jar she saw with relief that it had gripped the glass and was showing every sign of being alive, spreading its tentacles and waving them slightly in the water, feeling for something which it could enclose and devour.

She stood up and collected her sandals and fishing net, made of a handkerchief stretched round wire, and started off for the point on the wall where Michael and Pat were waiting. Pat was drying herself with a towel which she kept on the shore, and Michael was examining a place on his hand where he had chiselled himself instead of the boat.

The bell rang again, a little impatiently, and, holding her jar carefully, Sally broke into a run. Michael looked up.

'Come on!' he shouted, but Sally was coming as fast as she could and did not bother to answer. She arrived breathlessly and, holding up the jar, said:

'I've got one alive.'

The other two crowded round to see the anemone, which looked quite cheerful in its new surroundings.

'Look,' she said, holding the jar above their heads, 'I can see the food coming down from the top now, and watch it being digested.'

'How many did you slaughter before you got that one?' Michael asked.

'Two, I'm afraid. Actually they don't feel. They just wither and go grey.'

'Ugh!' said Pat. 'I'm not going to be a naturalist. I'd hate things withering near me.'



The tea bell rang a third time. Pat seized her towel, scrambled up the wall, and leapt the dyke. Michael waited to help Sally with her paraphernalia, and then they ran up along a twisty narrow path through some brambles and across the field, Sally coming last with water slopping on all sides. It ended in a race between Michael and Pat, who arrived simultaneously, hurling themselves through the french window into the dining-room.

Mr. and Mrs. Grange were already eating.

'Sorry, Dad; sorry, Mum,' said Michael, as he rushed through into the kitchen where he could be heard vigorously scrubbing his hands under the tap.

'Where's Sally?' Mrs. Grange asked.

'Oh, she's coming. She's got a sluggy thing in a jar. Can I have lemonade?'

Sally now came in and went round to her father.

'Look, Dad. Do look.' She held up the jar, and water dripped on to Mr. Grange's bread.

'Here, you little beast, take it away!' he said.

'Can't we have it on the table? It looks so lovely and shimmery.'

'No!' said her mother emphatically. 'We cannot.'

So Sally removed her treasure to the window sill and then sat down as Michael charged in and sat down, shaking the table. When he was settled and the tea had been poured out, their mother looked at their father and they both looked at the children.

'You tell them,' she said.

'No; you'd better, Jane.'

'Well,' she said, 'we're going to Scotland. Daddy has a commission to do a series of paintings in the highlands.'

There was a dead silence.

'What fun,' said Michael at length, trying to appear

enthusiastic, and Sally and Pat looked so miserable that their parents began to laugh.

'Don't you want to come?' their mother asked.

They were mystified at this strange behaviour, and Sally tried to explain how they would probably love Scotland when they were there, but having prepared for holidays at the creek, they had been taken by surprise when Scotland was mentioned. But their father could not keep up the joke any longer.

'It's all right,' he laughed. 'Only Mummy and I are going. You're staying here.'

'Staying here!' said Sally and Michael, while Pat gasped and sat with her mouth open, and then jumped up and began dancing round the room, ending by the window.

'All alone?' Sally asked, and Michael joined in:

'No awful aunts coming to look after us?'

'Michael, your aunts aren't awful—yes, we thought you could look after yourselves for a few days.'

Michael subsided into a dream, while Sally got down to business with her mother.

'What about food?' she queried first, and Michael joined in vaguely:

'Yes; food.'

'We'll give you some money and you can eat what you like, but do be sensible.'

'Meringues,' said Michael at once, and was answered firmly:

'Leeks!' by Pat, who then went on in a horrified voice:

'Ooh! Sally, come here. I've fed your thing on cake and it's stretching.'

Sally dashed to the window sill, followed by the others, and they watched in fascinated silence while the anemone stretched toward the surface of the water, getting thinner and thinner.

'It ought to wither,' Michael said quietly, and Pat answered:

'It's gone grey.'

Then, quite suddenly it collapsed, and lay a be-draggled heap on the floor of the jar. Sally sighed.

'Well, at least we now know that sea anemones don't like cake. But you are a stink, Pat.'

.

Eleven o'clock the next morning found Pat sitting on the gate-post sunning herself and listening to the last-minute packing noises coming from inside the house.

Far away at the bottom of the lane an ancient and battered black car rounded the bend. Pat turned quickly.

'Taxi!' she shouted, then slithered down the gate-post to the ground and ran into the house. 'Taxi, Daddy; taxi, Mummy. Michael, the taxi's here,' and then for Sally she called up the stairs: 'Taxi!'

And by this time every one was congregating with suit-cases and packages in the dining-room.

'Now lay everything on the floor,' Mr. Grange commanded, and he stood in the middle to inspect the luggage.

'Rucksack—canvas bag—leather case—stool. Yes, that's everything.'

'Everything except the mackintoshes. Pat, run and get them,' said Mrs. Grange.

'And your sandwiches, Mum.'

Sally came in looking business-like with a tea-cloth round her waist for an apron.

'I've put in eggs, tomato and cheese sandwiches, cake, apples, chocolate, and ginger beer.'

'And lugworm *à la* mud with sea anemone sauce,' finished Michael.

'Oo, you beast!' Sally leapt over the luggage and dealt him a blow with the packet of sandwiches dangling from her fingers. But this was too much for the bag of apples; they scattered themselves about the floor, and the family started a search in and out of the luggage. Then there was a loud knock at the door and, looking up, they saw Mr. Carter the taximan, standing massively in the doorway and looking disapprovingly at the muddle of family and luggage on the floor.

'Now,' he said, 'if you don't come along, I'll be missing that train for you.'

Pat stood watching him say it, and admiring the way his moustache twitched when he spoke. The rest of the family picked up the luggage and started for the door.

There was not room for all of them inside the car so Michael stepped up on the running-board. Mr. Carter tried the self-starter several times while the family waited expectantly, then he muttered something about 'not getting that train,' and heaved himself out to start the car with the handle.

'It's all right,' Mr. Grange whispered. 'We'll have at least half an hour for shopping. The train doesn't go 'til twelve.'

Pat turned round to say something, but at that moment she and Sally were hurled on top of their parents as Mr. Carter, panting and blowing, nearly lifted the car off the ground in a final effort to make it go. Michael, who was not holding on, was bounced off on to the ground, where he sat in a rose bush, to the huge delight of Sally, who had not forgiven him for his remark about the food. But the cheers of the family were cut short by a deafening clatter and roar. The car and all inside it began to shake violently, and Michael scrambled up again, this time taking a firm

hold of the windscreen, as the car, after an effort to go backwards through the kitchen window, started off down the lane.

They jolted and jostled down their own lane, which was little more than a track, but when they turned into the big lane it was less uncomfortable. But conversation was still impossible. Mr. Carter loved his horn. At every corner it let out a loud and searing blast, and as the lane was mostly corners the horn was in continual use. Mr. Carter said that he liked to use it because he was not always so sure of his brakes, and if he blew the horn then people would get out of his way before he ran into them.

And above the noise of the horn, and Mr. Carter's bellowed explanation, Michael talked, sometimes bending to look into the car, but most of the time shouting into the air as they went along and hoping someone would hear.

Sally simply put her fingers in her ears and gazed out of the window, and Pat read, though not without difficulty. Mr. and Mrs. Grange looked at each other and gave up until they should turn into the road, which was straighter, and only had low hedges on either side, so that Mr. Carter could see people coming a long way off and would not, they hoped, have to use the horn.

At last they were in this road. Mr. Carter trod on the accelerator, and they purred along the road which led round the edge of the island, open on one side to the creeks and the harbour, and on the other to flat, flat fields as far as the eye could see. The sun now glared down on the late harvest which was being gathered in.

The Granges breathed a sigh of relief and Michael was able to relax his grip a little.

At last the road took a sharp bend and went straight

along the top of the island to a bridge connecting it to the mainland.

When they reached the town two and a half miles inland they had, as Mr. Grange had said, more than half an hour to spare. So Mr. Carter dropped them outside the co-operative stores, and went off muttering that they would do better to go straight to the station, as you never could tell with trains.

And by the time they had trailed round the shops, Pat began to feel like Mr. Carter, that they really had no hope of catching the train. She ran up Station Road ahead of the others, and on to the bridge.

'Quick! quick!' she called back. 'It's going—oh, Mummy, hurry!'

But Michael, who had joined her, relieved them by shouting:

'No, it's all right. Only the panic train. There's three minutes yet.'

The panic train was any train which went just before that on which the Granges wanted to travel, causing them to think it was theirs.

'Oh, well, it jolly well might have been,' Pat answered. 'Come on, Mummy.'

It gave Pat a terrible feeling to be kept waiting at a ticket office; it seemed as if the people were being slow on purpose.

But in the end the tickets were bought, and they crossed the bridge, Mrs. Grange and Sally and Pat in front carrying the small things, and Mr. Grange and Michael behind carrying the large things. Almost as soon as they were on the platform the train came in, and there was a scurrying up and down to find corner seats. Pat and Michael both found them at once, and it looked as though Mr. Grange would have to sit in one coach and Mrs. Grange in another.

However, Michael gave up his claim when Pat leant out and whispered hoarsely:

'There's a frightfully peculiar man in here!'

'Close the doors, please. Stand back.'

The station had just got a megaphone of which the station-master was immensely proud; it seemed as though the whole town must hear when he made an announcement, and the children jumped back about three feet. The train started.

The three stood on the platform watching and waving until they could only see a shimmery speck far away along the line. Then they looked at each other, feeling a little flat. They were hot and sticky and no longer had the excitement of someone to see off.

'What about an ice-cream?' said Michael. There was no need to answer this, and they trooped into a shop close by the station to fortify themselves for the hot five-mile walk home.

This walk was punctuated by stops for ice-cream or lemonade, and during it they held a council of war on how they should spend their holiday. This seemed likely to develop into a quarrel by the time they had crossed the hot, straight bridge on to the island, when Sally had a bright suggestion.

'I know,' she said, 'why doesn't each person do exactly as he or she likes unless they're being a nuisance to any one else?'

There was silence, as no one could find fault with this. Then Pat put in gloomily:

'We're doing that in grammar.'

'Doing what?'

'Putting "they" when you only mean one person.'

Sally looked at Pat walking with her sandals full of dust, and her blazer held up inside out over her head.

'I vote we wait until something comes and then get a lift,' she said.

Once more no answer was needed, and they threw themselves down on the edge of the road. Pat immediately leapt up again with a yell, clutching her left leg and dancing in the road.

'Wasp!' she gasped at the other two, who also leapt up, partly to help her and partly in case they were also sitting on a wasp.

By the time they were up, Pat was holding up her skirt and examining the angry red puncture in the middle of a round white patch which was slowly growing in size. She put her finger on it and looked for help.

'Spit on it,' said Michael.

'Onions,' Sally answered, less helpfully.

Pat spat, but with little faith in its power to help.

'Honestly, it's the best thing to do. The old man who does the ditches always spits when he's stung,' Michael told her, but she was not much happier.

'His skin's leather,' she said.

At this moment the little three-wheeled milk van rocketed along towards them and slowed down when Sally held up her hand.

'Good day, miss.'

'Oh, Fred, do take us,' Sally said pleadingly. 'We're awfully hot, and Pat has sat on a wasp.'

'We-el'—Fred looked at the tiny passenger seat beside his—'we might manage it. Here, help me pile up these.'

They put two crates of empty bottles on top of each other, and Michael crept into the tiny space and sat with his knees hunched up. Then Sally sat half sideways in the seat and Pat sat on her lap, with her

legs going over the back of the seat, where Michael nursed them. In this way there was just enough room for Fred to operate the brake and gears.

'Miss Pat all right?' he asked a little anxiously—not that she could very well fall out, being firmly wedged—and they all three answered:

'Yes.'

The few springs the vehicle possessed were weighed down by the children, and they bumped along feeling very close to the ground. Then with the 'tocker-tocker-tocker' of the engine and the 'crish-crash' of the swaying bottles, there was no chance of a proper conversation.

'Lucky I'm going just past the bottom of your lane!' Fred shouted as he swung round a corner.

'Yes, lovely!' Sally screamed back. She had not heard exactly what he had said, but she was the only one in a position to answer. In spite of being wedged, Michael and Pat found that going round corners was an operation which needed all their concentration if they were to stay in the van at all.

At the bottom of their lane the little engine petered out and the van came to a standstill. The three tumbled out after the two-mile journey, hot, cramped, and sweaty.

'Thanks awfully, Fred!' they shouted, and then, 'Good-bye!' as he started up again and, grinning at them, disappeared round the corner of the road.

Michael stood on a grass patch and slowly performed one or two simple gymnastic exercises to see if his body still worked in the normal way, and Pat examined her wasp sting; the swelling by this time had grown to the size of a large saucer.

But home was now in sight, and they walked happily up the twisting shady lane, and when they came to their own track, began to run.

At first the house seemed peculiar, as if it did not like having them in charge. They stood just inside the doorway.

'It feels as if we ought to whisper,' Pat said quietly. Then, by a great effort, Sally said in a normally loud voice:

'Let's open all the windows. And I'll get an onion for your leg, Pat.' The spell was broken, and the house no longer felt unwelcoming.

Suddenly Michael's horrified voice came through the hatch into the kitchen:

'I say, it's a quarter to three and we've had no lunch!'

Cold meat, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, bread, lemonade, and plates were hastily pushed through into the dining-room, but just as they were about to begin the telephone rang.

'Gosh, we're being rung up!' Pat said.

'It's probably for Mummy,' Sally answered, and picked up the receiver.

'Hallo. This is Sally Grange. I'm afraid Mrs. Grange—— Mummy! Hallo—h!'

Michael and Pat both scrambled for the phone.

'Hi!' said Michael, and Pat tried the more direct method of force, but Sally clung on.

'Wha-at? Yes. Yes. Yes, we're O.K. Michael wants to say something.'

'Hallo, Mum. I say, is that you? We're just going to have lunch. Yes—lunch. Yes. Quarter to three.'

Pat could bear it no longer, and, pushing Michael's head out of the way, screamed:

'A wasp stung me!' There was a long silence.

'Wh-a-a-t?' Silence. 'Hi! Mummeel!'

She looked at the phone. 'It must have finished,' she said, but Michael took it from her.

'It 's not a clockwork thing,' he said, but nevertheless it had, undoubtedly, finished. They all turned to the table.

'I only heard "grr-grr-zonk." '

'It must have been the wasp stinging you,' said Michael, sharpening the carving knife.

'Beast!' Pat answered, and they all sat down to eat.

CHAPTER 2

RESCUE OF A COW

THE next day promised to be like the one before. At breakfast there was a thin mist lying over the harbour. At about ten this would quite suddenly roll off and disappear, leaving the harbour in soft greys and greens under a pale sky. Then as the sun rose, the colour would deepen, the sky become a blue dome fading to a heat haze on the horizon, and the marshes would stretch in thick green patches into the harbour, while the mud glittered in the sun. Then at twelve-thirty the tide would begin to creep in again and fill the harbour during the hot afternoon.

Sally decided that she would get provisions early in the day, before it was too hot to be comfortable walking with a heavy basket on either side.

'Well, I'm going to get on with the dinghy,' Michael said. 'She ought to be ready in a day or two and then I'll take you all out.'

Michael had bought an old dinghy for ten shillings, but she had needed a lot of attention. She was covered with barnacles and had several holes and needed repainting. The others had doubted whether he could make her seaworthy, but now, as he said, she was nearly ready.

'Can I help?' Pat asked. 'At least, you don't want me, do you, Sally?' Pat hated anything to do with housework or cooking so this offer was heroic. But Sally said she could manage alone. Actually she loved shopping, so that was all right, and half an hour later, when they had washed up and made the beds, Sally set off with two baskets towards the bus

which ran in the morning and would take her down to the village at the other end of the island. And Michael and Pat went down to the shore with Michael's tools.

'It's going to be hot,' he said. Already the sun had penetrated the mist and the harbour was beginning to wake up.

'Here now, help with this.'

Together they turned the dinghy over. Michael gave Pat a little sharp, broad tool with which to scrape off a patch of barnacles, while he sawed off a length of wood for the seat. Pat was a little discontented with her job.

'I'll have this done in five minutes,' she said, looking at the comparatively small patch.

'I'll bet you won't,' Michael answered, without looking up. And she had not. After half an hour of scraping and scraping and scraping with a horrid scratchy sound there was still a good amount of work to be done, and to add to her discomfiture Michael had turned the dinghy right way up again so that she had to work half lying on the stony shore. Her fingers were bleeding and her back stiff.

Michael, concentrating on his own work, had not spoken except for occasional mutters which were not addressed to her. That's the worst of Michael, she thought, standing up and stretching her back, he won't talk when you want him to.

The sun was now really hot, and a haze quivered over the thin blue line that marked the distant entrance to the harbour. Pat picked up the straw hat beside her and put it on.

'Tired?' Michael asked.

'No,' she answered, and returned to her work. Much as she would have liked, she could not give in, having said that she would only take five minutes.

But the tireder and hotter she became, the more obstinately the barnacles clung to the bottom of the boat.

At last there was only a tiny patch left, and with one victorious scrape they came off, and the little boat was clean.

She flung the tool down on the shore.

'Pick that up,' Michael told her roughly. He was proud of his tools. Pat picked it up sulkily and then wandered off, and left him working. He didn't even say 'thank you,' she thought.

The marshes looked inviting and she started toward them. She intended to spend the rest of the morning lying on her back and listening to the noises of the birds and insects and watching the sky. But when she was still some distance off she saw a curious thing, and shaded her eyes to look more carefully.

It was not unusual for cows to stray on to the marshes, but now there was a group standing on the shore facing the creek, and across the marshes toward it the rest of the herd, about twenty cows, were galloping untidily and mooing with excitement. When one reached the group on the shore she would stop and remain silent, gazing out across the creek.

Wondering what this strange behaviour meant, Pat hurried along the shore. Then, branching off into the marshes, ran for some moments, leaping the small dykes and ponds and splashing through the wet parts. Then she turned round to stalk the cows from behind. But as she got nearer they took no notice, so she gave up stalking and walked boldly forward, soon arriving behind the group of some thirty cows all stolidly looking out toward the creek.

Suddenly one gave a terrific bellow. Though she could not see which one it was, something told her that the noise was a distress signal, and she dashed

forward. When she came to the shore she stood stock-still and stared, just as the cows were doing.

'O Lord!' she said out loud. Almost down in the channel of the creek a cow was stuck in the mud. She was not sinking, as far as Pat could see, but was deep down, having fallen on her knees. The mud was round her neck and her great head looked sadly round while she lowed piteously.

Pat ran down to the edge of the mud. She saw at once that there was nothing she could do alone, and turning she only saw the dumb, stupidly staring cows.

She stamped her foot in helpless rage at their vacant faces and then, straining her eyes, she saw the little speck that was Michael's white shirt. He was bending over the dinghy.

'Michael!' she yelled, and then urged by the fear in her own voice, again louder, screaming the first syllable:

'Mi-chael!'

Instantly all thirty cows lifted up their heads and bellowed into the air. The victim in the mud, further frightened, also began to bellow, struggling to free herself, but only sinking deeper in.

Furious at their useless sympathy Pat faced the cows and shouted:

'Shut up!' To her surprise they did, and one or two backed nervously away. She turned her attention to the distant Michael. He was looking up, attracted more perhaps by the cows than her call.

'Help!' she called, energetically waving her arms in the air. 'Help! Help!'

He realized something was wrong. At that moment Sally appeared, having walked back along the creek, and after a few seconds' delay while she dumped the shopping on the sea wall, Pat saw the two of them running along the shore towards her.

'Come on! Come on!' she shouted, in case they should think the danger was over.

They were coming, racing over the stones, in spite of the heat.

They saw some distance away what had happened, and Michael was already forming plans in his head. For a moment, when they arrived, they had to stop for breath, then Michael said:

'D' you know this part of the mud, Sally?'

There were few parts of the creek where Sally did not know the depth of the mud. She had travelled all over it carefully testing with poles where she was about to walk. She looked out and pointed, speaking between pants for breath:

'We can get down there'—she pointed straight down toward the cow—'and circle round and come up by the side of her.'

'Is she safe there, or will she sink?'

'She 's all right at the moment, but if she gets to the left she 'll sink. I don't know how deep it is in that patch.'

'All right.' Michael took command.

'Come on, Sally—we 'll get the oars out of the oyster-boat. No, Pat, you come, and Sally have a rest.'

Michael and Pat started off toward a small boat a hundred yards further down the creek which was used by the man who looked after some oyster beds in that part of the creek. Sally remained behind, biting her lips as she thought over the problem.

Luckily she knew this part of the mud well, and while she was waiting for the others she started down toward the unfortunate cow. She saw her coming and began to plunge madly, trying to raise herself from her knees with convulsive jerks. Sally stopped, not much more than ankle-deep in mud; here was a new difficulty. Looking back, she saw that Michael

and Pat were coming; they had three oars, a large spade, and some mud shoes. These were slats of wood with straps to put over the feet, and they served the same purpose as snow-shoes.

'She's frightened,' Sally called.

'Oo-h.' Michael stopped and thought. 'Well, we'll come at her from three sides. You wear the slats, Sally, and Pat and I will go round below her. You must try and keep her calm while we dig out her knees, and don't, for heaven's sake, let her go forward, if it's deep.'

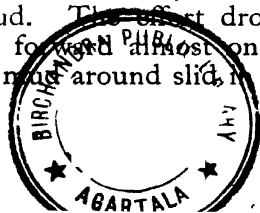
They started off after Sally had strapped on the slats. The cow, seeing them advance, lunged helplessly back and forward, the whites of her eyes rolling in terror, while she uttered tired and plaintive moos, which were echoed in ragged sympathy from the shore.

Michael and Pat had soon plodded to the other side, and Sally was about ten yards in front of her. By this time she was quite frantic, and Michael was just about to call out that they must go back because she was getting dangerous, when something happened: she stopped still, quivering but docile.

Sally had clambered up to her, talking in a friendly way. She got quite close, and then, putting her hand on the cow's nose, went on talking. Slowly the great animal's body relaxed until she was lying quiet instead of trying to resist the slushy gripping mud, and turning her head to Sally she gave a low moo as if of recognition and thankfulness.

'Now,' said Sally, talking to the others, 'I think you might begin to dig out her knees.'

Michael struck down through the soft mud quite close to the cow's knees, and then heaved up a heavy slab of mud. The effort drove him in deeper and threw him forward almost on to the cow, and then slowly the mud around slid in to fill up the gap.



The second time he tried digging the spade down against her body and heaving outwards, but he found it too heavy to remove the mud without levering the spade against her. By an almost superhuman effort he did achieve this, and for a second one leg was free almost down to the knee, but she was too far sunk to be able to get up without having both legs free.

'Sorry, Sall, it's no good,' Michael said, standing up and leaning on the spade. His arms and legs were covered with the clinging, slightly salt-smelling mud, and it was spattered over his shorts and shirt and even in his hair.

The cow sensed their anxiety and renewed her struggles, but she was tired and Sally had no difficulty in quieting her.

'One of us 'll have to go for help,' she said, and they both looked at Pat, who was standing a little distance away and murmuring:

'Oh, the poor cow. Oh, the poor cow.'

'Come on, Pat, do some work for your living. Go and get Mr. Potts and tell him we've got nothing but a spade.'

Glad to have something to do, Pat slopped off across the mud to the shore, and through the army of cows toward Mr. Potts's farm nearly a mile away. They watched her running across the marshes, and then looked at each other.

'Is there anything we can do?' Sally asked. Michael walked round the cow.

'I don't know. Her hind legs have sunk now. Gosh, I'm pining for a drink.'

'Same here,' said Sally, and glanced idly down to the channel where there was a stream of water. Then she suddenly looked up in alarm.

'I say, what's the time?'

Michael at once grasped her meaning. She wanted

to know because the tide would not have far to come in before it reached the place where they were.

'Fred said high tide's at five-seven to-day. I suppose it's about twelve-thirty now,' he said. 'Anyway, the tide has turned.'

What not many minutes ago had been a tiny sleepy trickle of water was now a busy stream pushing vigorously along the channel.

'How long will it take to get up to here?' He looked at Sally.

'About an hour, I should say,' she answered, and then went on almost apologetically: 'It comes quickly up this first bit.' She glanced across the marshes, but there was no hope of Pat coming yet. They were almost in despair.

'Tell you what we'll do. Get those slats off.' Michael went down on his knees and began feeling down to see how far it was to the cow's knees. She protested slightly, but he persevered, and at last withdrew his arm. Sally handed him the two wooden squares.

'Now,' he said, 'we've got to get one under each knee.'

Sally began to scrape away the mud with her hands while Michael shovelled with a slat. This was much more effective than using a spade as they could work quickly, and the mud did not have time to slide in again.

'Good,' Michael grunted, and began to edge in the slat under one knee.

But suddenly the unexpected happened. With a convulsive movement of terror the cow heaved out her leg. Sally jerked herself free, but Michael was kneeling. Her hoof caught his arm just below the elbow, and then, slowly, heavily, her huge body slid away from them as she rolled over on to her side.



Michael leapt up, and with a wild idea of saving her by pushing her back, rushed through the mud round her head, going out of the way to avoid the kicking hoof.

'Michael! The mud!' Sally screamed, but it was too late. He had forgotten that deep mud lay ahead of the cow, and plunged in, sinking to his hips, and then slowly, very slowly, going in further.

For a second Sally felt dizzy and in a bad dream. She did not know whether to attend to the cow lying on her back, struggling like a fly on a fly-paper, or Michael nearly up to his waist in mud.

Then she felt ice-cold. Taking a step forward she threw herself full length on the mud, spread-eagling her legs. In this way her weight would be distributed evenly over a large area of mud and she would not sink.

'Now,' she said, and her voice sounded cool and steady, 'don't move or struggle.' She put her arms round his waist and clasped them behind him.

'Have you reached the bottom?'

ed to shift his legs, to feel, but the mud was heavy and he could not move.

n't think so,' he said.

h their voices sounded so calm and assured that, though they were terribly frightened, they infected other with confidence.

Well, don't kick unless you think you're coming free. I'm going to try and lift you.' Cautiously Sally drew up her knees, and with all her strength pulled at his body, but with no effect. 'We must wait,' she said. 'The men will soon be here. Is there any sign?'

'Can't see,' he said. 'The poor old cow's in the way, kicking like mad. I do hope we get her out.'

They were both talking frantically to keep up their spirits, and all the time Sally was watching the tide creep slowly nearer.

'You know, we'll laugh at this afterwards. If it weren't dangerous I bet we'd look pretty funny now.' They both did laugh at the thought of Sally, face down, lying in the mud, Michael with only his top half showing, and a few yards away a cow lying on her back waving her legs like a drunken wasp.

'I say, don't laugh,' said Sally. 'It's better to keep still.'

For a minute or two they did keep still, desperately fighting off the fear they both felt. The cow, exhausted, also lay quiet, and in that second they heard heavy boots over the stones, and a hail:

'Hang on! We're here.'

Boots slithered down the mud, and there were cheerful voices.

'Coming behind you, Miss Sally, with a ladder.' It was Fred's voice.

'You're always getting us out of jams,' Michael laughed, and Fred grinned back.

'That's right. Never let you down. Now here's the end of the ladder.' He pushed it close to Michael. 'Take the top rung, Master Michael. I'll change places with Miss Sally.'

Michael grasped the top rung, and Sally carefully changed places, letting go first with one arm and then the other, while Fred slid his arms in under Michael's armpits, so that he was never left unsupported.

'Now, as I lift, you pull yourself out, rung by rung. You go and sit on the end of the ladder, Miss Sally. H'm! Your arm's swollen. Is it any use?'

Michael tried pulling himself up by the arm that had been kicked, but had to let go.

'Awfully sorry, Fred. It's not.'

'Never mind.' Then he called out: 'Mr. Potts, we'll have to have help. Master Michael's hurt his arm.'

Mr. Potts splashed over from where he and another man had been passing a rope net round the cow.

'All right, son. We'll have you out in a jiffy. I'll put a rope round you—got it, Fred? Now ease him out so's the rope don't cut too badly, and lay your good hand on the rungs, son.'

'O.K. I'm ready,' Michael said, and Mr. Potts heaved on the rope.

Getting him out hurt a lot. Michael felt as though his arms were being pulled out of their sockets. But Fred eased this by helping him up, and there was the relief of feeling his legs move up slowly through the mud, and the air on his body, after being stuck in that hot prison.

Gradually he held the ladder further and further up, and then, just as he thought he must cry out in pain, the rope slackened.

'That's enough. Right,' Mr. Potts said, and

strode forward to where he could reach Michael sprawled across the ladder. He bent swiftly and, putting his arms round Michael, heaved him with one movement clear of the mud, which let out a loud squelch of despair as it finally let go of his feet.

They gave a sigh of relief, and Michael felt himself all over to see that none had been left behind.

The other men and Pat stopped work.

'You need a bath,' Pat said, looking at the group, and they all laughed.

'Well, there's the cow now,' Michael said, and started to go forward.

'There is the cow, young man,' said Mr. Potts, 'but you're sitting on that ladder. We'll move you off if we need it.'

Michael was furious at being left out, but the farmer's voice was quite firm. So Michael and Sally and Pat squatted on the ladder, while the three men went to the cow.

Thinking of their own clumsy efforts, it was extraordinary how skilfully the men worked. Soon the cow was encased in a strong rope net, the ends of which were held by the men.

'Now. Ready?' Mr. Potts said.

'Uhu.'

'One, two, three, heave! One, two, three, heave! One, two three, heave!'

At the first heave the cow's limp body moved; at the second she was struggling to find a foothold, and at the third she was upright. With surprising agility Mr. Potts and Fred leapt one each side of her and passed the net under her body to form a sling, while the third man slipped a halter over her head. Their task was made easier by the fact that she was too tired to struggle.

And then a strange little procession trailed up the

mud to the shore, as the tide came and lapped on the churned-up mud where they had been.

First went the cow with the sling under her, so that Mr. Potts and Fred, one on each side, bore most of her weight, while the third man encouraged and helped her in front. Then came the children carrying the ladder; Sally at the head and Michael and Pat behind, they slopped up in silence.

At last the party was on the shore, bedraggled and filthy. There was a slightly embarrassed silence, and then the farmer turned to the children:

'Well, we owe a lot to you three. You did a good job of work, and this cow would have been a goner without you.'

'Thanks awfully for getting me out,' Michael answered, and the other two agreed.

'And we're jolly glad we saw her,' Sally added.

'We'd better get her back now,' Fred said, 'and you see to that arm, Master Michael.'

Mr. Potts and Fred led the cow off, still helping her with the sling. Pat suddenly laughed.

'Oh, look at that!'

The rest of the herd, having gone back to the marshes, were now solemnly trooping after their distressed companion.

Sally turned to the man with them.

'You're the person who has the boat yards, aren't you?'

'Yes, I've seen you about, but we've never contacted. What about coming and having lunch in my caravan? I live in it just behind the sheds.'

'I say, rather!' And Pat added:

'We're a bit dirty.'

'Yes,' he laughed. 'I'd appreciate it if you'd wash first. And we'd better do something about your arm. Let's have a look.' He gently wiped

off the mud which was drying on Michael's arm. There was a large swelling by the elbow.

'Yes. It needs attention. Tell you what, we'll go and wash at your place, and then I'll run you along to the doctor in the car, just in case there's anything wrong, while you girls go and get lunch in the caravan. By the way, you'll have to bring some food.'

Sally suddenly remembered that they did not know each other's names.

'This is Michael,' she said, 'and this is Pat, and I'm Sally.'

'And I'm Pete,' he answered. 'Come on, we've earned our lunch.'

And the children being in complete agreement, they hurried along the shore toward the garage hose.



CHAPTER 3

HEARING THINGS

THE garage and concrete slab outside were one large, slushy puddle with the hose curling about on the floor. Pete and Michael had gone off to the yard, and Sally and Pat were in the house. They were moderately clean.

'Get salady things,' Sally called from upstairs, where she was changing.

Pat grubbed about in the vegetable rack and collected lettuce and tomatoes and a cucumber.

'Bread?' she called up the stairs.

'Yes—and that bit of joint.' Sally arrived in the kitchen and flicked a basket off the back of the door. 'Here, put them in.' She held the basket wide and Pat crammed in the food, balancing the tomatoes on top.

They banged the door behind them and started for the creek. There was a narrow path along the top of the sea wall with stiles between the fields. After four of these stiles they reached the head of the creek and were at the boat yards. Here the mud had been built up into berths for ships, and a long wooden pier stretched into the creek. It was made of posts, or piles, dug into the mud, with short lengths of plank resting on top of them to form a pathway. On either side of this duckboarding, as it was called, were the mud berths. There were five ships in at the moment, apart from a number of sailing and rowing dinghies littered about the mud. The five consisted of a two-masted schooner, two other sailing vessels, and two smaller motor launches.

Leading in from the shore was a slipway to the sheds with rails on which the boats travelled up and down. Behind the sheds, and across the fields, tucked among the brambles, was a small green caravan. The top was just visible.

'Ah! There it is,' Sally said, and they leapt the reedy dyke behind the sea wall, and made their way through the tall dry grass and yellow ragwort.

'I suppose we just go in,' Pat said as they arrived.

'Yes, except that the door's locked.' Sally pushed against the small door in the side. 'Oh, well, the window's open.' She bent over with her arms folded above her head, and leant against the side of the caravan below the window. Pat scrambled up on her back and stepped through on to the draining board, then opened the door for Sally.

They stood looking round. The floor had a dirty piece of oilcloth on it. On the opposite side from the window was a low bunk with bookshelves above crammed and overflowing with books.

At one end was a broad shelf with a primus, and

nearby a wash-basin. And at the other end there was a table with a lamp, a miniature wireless, and a torch on it. There was another small table in the centre with a none-too-clean cotton cloth on it, and by the door stood large gum-boots, two old seaman's sweaters, and oilskins.

'What fun!' Pat said. Sally was unpacking the basket and dumping the contents on the table.

'See what he's got,' she said, and Pat began burrowing in the cupboards.

'Salt,' she said, and put a box of Saxa salt by the food. 'Jam—butter—tea, and here's a tin of sardines.' Sally looked round vaguely.

'Milk we want, and a tin-opener. There may be milk in that cool-box thing outside the door.'

Pat went out to search.

'Here we are,' she called, and came back with a nearly full bottle. 'Smells a bit queer.'

'What about water?'

There seemed to be no water. Then Sally saw two petrol cans, and lifted one up. She unscrewed it and smelt.

'Th—that's water. At least, smell.' Pat smelt.

'Yes, I suppose so. Shall I put some in the kettle?'

'Yes. Now, matches. Ah! here, I suppose this is meths. I always forget the different smells.'

She tipped a little liquid from a bottle into the circular tray near the top of the primus, and having unscrewed a small cap at the bottom, applied a match to the meths; it burnt with a sleepy blue flame. When that flame was nearly out she screwed up the cap again to compress the air inside, and started to pump vigorously with a little handle near it which pushed in and out. Suddenly, with a flare and a screaming noise, the ring on top of the tray took light. Then after a moment she stopped pumping and put on the kettle.

Pat, by this time, had found a tin-opener, and the sardines were on a plate. They sat down to wait for the kettle, and Pete and Michael.

'Hope he 's all right,' Sally said.

'Mm.'

Pat was studying one of the books from the shelves. There were ten volumes of a nature encyclopaedia and several other books on insects. The other books were on navigation, mathematics, and stamp collecting.

Sally looked over Pat's shoulder and they read in silence; Pat about ants, and Sally about anemones further up the page.

Sally had just broken off to attend to the tea-making, when there were steps outside and Pete and Michael came in.

'Oh, Michael, is it broken?' Pat asked, seeing his wrist sling.

Michael laughed.

'No, only bruised. He put something on to take the swelling away and said rest it for twenty-four hours.'

'Hope you found everything?' Pete inquired. He seemed to fill up the caravan with his enormous frame, and he breathed good humour and vigour as he kicked off his gum-boots and sloshed water into the basin.

'I think so; we invaded all your cupboards,' Sally answered him.

'Good. Let 's get down to it.'

Half an hour later they were lying back, with the remains of the food scattered about. Pete and Michael were on the bunk, Sally sat on the shelf from whence the primus had been removed, and Pat was perched with a cushion half on the draining board, half on the window sill.

There had just been an interruption as Pat had decided she needed another slice of bread and cheese, and the others were draining the teapot.

'Go on!' Pat commanded imperiously, through a mouthful.

'Well,' said Pete, 'after he'd killed the excise officer, he took him down to the creek and buried him, just about opposite your house. Of course, they all knew he'd done it, but couldn't nail it on him. He confessed about thirty years later when he was dying in jail, and they dug up the skeleton. You ought to go and visit the old chap who lives there now. I suppose you've seen him about. He'd show you the window in the side of the cottage from where they used to signal to the boats bringing in the brandy.'

'How long ago was all this?' Michael asked.

'Oh, not more than fifty or sixty years. The old man's father bought up the place when Rob went to jail—got it for a song. People were afraid of ghosts. You know—a murder and all that; not a very pleasant one either.'

'Ghosts?' asked Pat.

Pete laughed. 'Not a hope. No, really—the place is completely unhaunted. Well, I ask you, is your part of the creek haunted?'

'No.' They all three said, a little sadly.

'I say,' said Michael, 'does any smuggling go on nowadays?'

Pete hesitated.

'Well, not that sort, no. But we're having a spot of trouble with gentleman smuggling.'

'Gentleman smuggling?'

'Yes. That's what I call it. A ship came into the harbour a few weeks ago, an ordinary private motor yacht. She stood at anchor a few days and the authorities got suspicious and went out to take a look. She was deserted, and inside the cabin was lined with ledges where there'd been cocaine. It had been removed in a hurry, too. They must have got,

wind of a search and gone before they'd meant. You can see her half-way up the channel, a one-mast motor yacht.'

'What 'll they do about her?'

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

'Can't say. The people won't come back for her. Too risky. Well'—he stretched—'I ought to get back to work. Jolly glad I happened to be over at Potts's this morning. We must see more of each other.'

'Yes, rather,' the children answered.

'Shall we wash up?'

'Oh, don't bother,' Pete said. 'I usually wait 'til I'm out of china and then throw the lot in the basin.'

Nevertheless they had washed up and tidied the caravan before they slammed the door behind them and started back across the field.

'Let's go and see that ship,' Pat suggested.

They agreed on this and went further down the creek to borrow Mr. Potts's dinghy which had an outboard motor, as Michael could not use his arm for rowing.

They motored out from the creek to her, and switched off a few yards away. She looked peaceful and harmless, rocking gently at anchor half-way up the main channel of the harbour.

But they felt that she was surrounded by mystery. Where had she come from? For where was her strange cargo destined? Was it now being passed from hand to hand furtively, somewhere in the heart of London?

An abandoned ship in any case has something exciting about it, but the reason for the *Louisiana's* abandonment made her doubly exciting.

Michael was all for going on board and finding the little niches that had lodged the cocaine on its journey from—where? China? No, more probably France.



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But Sally suggested that she might be under observation from the shore, and this thought daunted them all. It would look none too well to get mixed up in the case.

So after going all round her they decided not to board her, and came away.

Later on in the evening they were lying with cushions on the veranda. The air was very still and they could hear the far-off roar of the water as it crossed the bar of sandbanks which stretched for a mile or so outside the harbour. Nearer, on the marshes, they could hear the twitter and squawks of birds settling down for the night. Bats were swooping about in front of them.

'Can you hear them?' Sally asked.

'Hear what?'

'The bats.'

'No. They don't make any sound,' Michael said.

'They do. A high-up squeak.'

They listened. In a minute Michael heard it, but it was such a tiny sound that he could not be sure, and listened again. Then, above the munching and breathing of the cows in the field next door, divided from their own by a thin wire fence, he heard it again.

'There?'

'Mm. That's it.'

Michael half turned over on his back.

'D'you hear it, Pat?' There was no answer. Pat was curled up asleep in a nest of cushions.

'We'd better go to bed, Sall.'

'Mm. Shutting the stable door after the horse has gone. Wake up, Pat.' Sally leant over Michael and shook her gently. A low murmury growl came from somewhere in the depths of Pat and she wriggled and snuffled further into the cushions.

Sally and Michael had no energy left and they lay back in silence.

Sally was the first to overcome her desire to stay there all night, and got up slowly and stiffly. It was quite dark now.

'Come on, Michael. We'll put her on the divan.'

Together they managed to wake Pat sufficiently to heave her indoors and dump her down. Then they covered her with a rug, shut the door, and went sleepily to bed themselves.

Soon the house was completely quiet.

About two hours later Pat turned in her sleep. It seemed to her that for many years she had been listening to a gentle 'scritch-scratch-scritch-scritch-scratch.'

Then it suddenly became clear to her that the sound was that of a glass-cutting diamond in use. She sat up, her heart pounding. Yes. There was someone outside the door, which was made of glass panes in a lead frame, and he was cutting out a pane. She strained her eyes, but could see nothing.

Feeling for the bookcase beside her she slipped noiselessly from underneath the rug and crept across the dining-room, avoiding the table and the Welsh dresser. With utmost caution she pressed both hands on the door handle and turned it. There was a slight click and she stopped dead, but the noise went on, 'scritch-scratch-scritch,' and opening the door she went through to the passage.

She went barefoot up the stairs, two steps at a time, treading softly but firmly so that they should not creak, and into Sally's room, the door of which was open. Feeling for Sally's shoulder she shook it.

'Sally! Sally!'

'Uueeer?'

'Sh! Listen. Someone's getting in downstairs!'

Sally sat up in bed, fully awake, and they listened. Fainter, but unmistakably, came the sound.

'Stay here,' she said, 'I'll wake Michael.'

Pat's eyes were accustomed to the dark, and in a minute she saw the dark forms of Michael and Sally coming back. Michael had put on a pair of shorts and a sweater over his pyjamas, and now Sally was dressed too. Pat was fully dressed as she had never undressed. Michael and Sally both carried sandals.

'Are you barefoot?' Michael asked Pat.

'Yes, but my sandals are in the hall.'

'Right. I'll go to the studio and get the bats.'

Sally and Pat waited, listening for the click of the lock when the burglar got in. Then Michael came back and gave Sally one cricket bat and kept the other himself, giving Pat the rounders bat.

'Pat,' he whispered, 'lean over the balcony and see if you can see anything.'

She could see nothing, but could hear the cutting, which sounded very close. She went back and made her report.

'O.K. Now I'll go down first, and when we're down you two wait in the hall while I reconnoitre through the playroom window. It's possible there's someone already in the house, so stand back to back with your bats raised, and if any one comes, don't wait, hit.'

One by one they crept down the stairs, and then Michael left the girls, who waited, trying not to let their legs tremble, peering into the dark.

Suddenly Pat gasped and took a step forward.

'Look out, you fool. It's me!' The voice was Michael's.

'Sorry. I thought it was him.'

'Well, he'd have got you first if it had been,' Michael whispered, and went on: 'Can't see a rotten thing, but there are at least two of them. I think they're trying the window now. They didn't bar-

gain for the bolt at the top of the door.' Then he went on a bit nervously: 'Look here, I don't think there's any one inside. I think I'd better go out and take a look at things.'

'I'm coming too,' said Sally and Pat together.

'No. Don't be asses. I'm only going to find out what the position is. If there's only one I'll get up from behind and conk him. If there are more we must all get out.'

This really did seem the wisest plan.

'All right, I suppose so. But be quick,' Sally said, and Michael left them. They heard the sound of the key turning in the back door lock, a click, and then silence. A deep horror descended on them.

'Suppose he's waiting for Michael round the corner,' Pat whispered.

'Don't,' Sally answered. 'He won't be, because he's not expecting him.'

'He might be on guard, in case.'

'Oh, shut up! I say, shall we go out too?'

'No, we'd better wait. He told us to.'

So they waited miserably in the dark until suddenly Sally jumped and Pat gave a little scream. Then, throwing caution to the winds, they scrambled for the door, flung it open, and tore round to the veranda.

'Michael! Where are you? Michael!' Sally screamed.

And then they stopped dead. Michael was somewhere on the veranda, roaring with laughter. The two others stood, ready to hurl their bats at any approaching danger. Then Michael became articulate.

'Cow,' he blurted out between explosions of laughter. 'Cow—scratching its horns—tripped over the wretched thing.'

All three stood there and laughed in the dark.

'Oh, dear,' Michael said at last. 'I crept up, jittering with fright, and suddenly plunged head first over a jolly old cow. It was just about as frightened as me and lumbered off in a colossal panic. Sorry to frighten you.'

'Whew! We thought you'd gone mad or something,' Sally said, as they trooped back into the house.

'I say, I'm hungry,' said Pat. So they went into the larder and found biscuits and lemonade which they took up through Sally's room on to the balcony, getting some blankets on the way. Then they sat in the dark and ate and drank.

Down below they could hear the cow munching in the grass.

'That's the second cow to-day,' Pat remarked.

'Yes. I wonder how many more dances they'll lead us,' Sally answered. 'Well, we'd better get back to bed.'

Sally and Michael went back to their rooms, and Pat went along to her bed in the studio. She usually slept downstairs, but had moved up to be with the others while they were alone.

But once in bed Pat began to think of smugglers, and the corpse of the excise officer which had lain thirty years in the mud opposite their house. Soon she slipped out and went into Sally's room.

'I say, Sally. Are you awake?'

'Yes. Do hop into my bed. I'm feeling so nervous and Michael's sleeping in a hoggish slumber.'

They whispered together for a few moments, becoming more and more drowsy. Then Sally murmured:

'If he climbs over the balcony, hit him on the knuckles and make him drop.'

And Pat answered through a dream:

'I don't think cows can climb, can they?'

CHAPTER 4

CRAV APPLIES

NINE o'clock the next morning found all three asleep.

At a quarter to ten Pat turned drowsily, but being in the same bed as Sally, which was only meant for one, she rolled out on to the floor taking most of the bedclothes with her. Sally grunted and then took no further notice.

For a few seconds Pat lay dozing, wondering what had happened to her, and then she remembered. She tried to go on dozing, but was too uncomfortable, so she got up and lifted the clothes back on to Sally.

The sun was shining in through the balcony door, and she went out. It was going to be another hot day; the mist was clearing from the harbour, leaving it fresh and clean.

The cow had not yet found her way out of their field and was gazing up at her. Pat made a face at her and then, skipping through the door, went to the studio to dress.

Then as she prepared breakfast she made a good clatter with the china so that the others would waken.

As usual when Pat had anything to do with cooking, she forgot something, so when Sally came down the electric kettle was filled and plugged in, but not switched on.

'Hallo, Sall. Everything's ready except the tea.'

'Kettle's not switched on,' Sally said.

While the water was heating, they remembered they had not washed, so they turned on the tap in the sink and did what was good enough for washing when no one was about. Then they stood at the bottom of

the stairs and called Michael. At first there was no response, but soon with a heave and a crash he appeared at the top of the stairs.

'We've finished breakfast,' Sally told him.

'Oh, gosh! Leave me some.' He disappeared into the bedroom and called energetically: 'Give me something. Anything will do,' as he pulled the comb through his hair. 'After all,' he pleaded as he jumped down the stairs, 'you wouldn't like me to starve.'

He stopped and looked at them, frowning:

'I don't believe you have finished breakfast.'

'Yes, we have. We're having lunch: flakes, toast, and tea. There's nothing else left.'

'Well, I'll be in on lunch, anyway,' he laughed, and made a dash for the dining-room.

'Now,' Michael said as they got up from the meal, 'what are we going to do?'

No suggestions were forthcoming until Sally, who was half out on the veranda, suggested that they might clear the ditch. This was received enthusiastically.

The ditch ran down the side of their field and drained on to the shore. It came from the farm about three miles away, and as well as draining the farmyard in winter, it was useful for draining the fields which otherwise would have become waterlogged. But in the summer it was dry, and became completely overgrown and clogged.

The hedge along the Granges' field was covered with brambles which grew down into it, and weeds grew from the sides and bottom. Then half-way down the field it became practically inaccessible as the land was thick with brambles and gorse, and bushes covered it from both sides and above.

To clear it was the annual task of whoever owned the field, and was a big task.

The children went into the toolshed.

'I should think we might take everything,' Sally said.

'Well, we don't want the trowel.'

Michael was poking about among the tools in the corner.

'Owl!' He had knocked his bruised arm on the mower.

'Perhaps we 'd better leave it 'til your arm 's better,' Sally suggested.

'No. I can use my right arm. Anyway, it 's good



to exercise it. Here, take this'—he pulled out a long wooden rake and handed it to Pat—'and these.' Two garden forks followed.

'What about these hook things, Michael?'

Sally had taken from the wall two tools with sharp circular steel blades and short wooden handles, useful for sweeping off long grass, or tackling stubborn brambles and undergrowth.

'Yes,' Michael said, looking back, 'all of those you can find. We'll probably need the scythe too.' He was rather proud of his ability to use the scythe; neither of the others could. When Sally tried she was a danger to any one else nearby, and herself, and Pat was too small to wield it.

'Well, that will do to begin with. Let's see what we've got.'

They had the wooden rake, and a smaller one, the two forks, three hooks, and the scythe.

'We'll have the barrow too to cart away the stuff,' said Michael.

'Can't we dump it on the edge?' Sally asked.

'No, better take it away. There'll be mountains of it.'

And mountains there were. They started at the end of the field near the house where the ditch was choked mostly with grass, dead leaves, and dried mud, and ramblers growing out from the hedge. They soon had a barrowload of refuse.

First, using the scythe, Michael cut away the grass from the edge so that they could see what they were doing. Then they hacked off the overhanging grass from each side. Then Pat, being the smallest, leapt into the ditch, but as quickly scrambled out again and sat nursing her feet.

'It's a bed of brambles in there,' she said sadly.

So they lay on their stomachs and, leaning over,

hooked up the brambles until there was a fairly soft bottom to the ditch.

Then Pat climbed down again, this time with great caution, and began shovelling out the leaves with two boards which Michael had fetched.

So twenty minutes later a yard of the ditch was clean and free, and the barrow had been piled high twice. Slowly Michael set off for the third time, across the field to the rubbish heap. He could not see where he was going and the pile wobbled perilously. Sally ran to the rescue as a clod of earth fell off with a plomp, and holding the rubbish on with a fork, she guided Michael along the field, while Pat began with a hook on the next bit of ditch.

They worked more quickly as they became accustomed to the tools, and found out the most economical method of work.

There was a break at about twelve when Sally plunged her hook into what she thought was only a sea of brambles, but what actually had a small tree trunk behind it. The tip of the hook stuck firmly in this, and Sally was pulled after it and lay helpless in the brambles.

The other two were also helpless, though with laughter, as they hauled her this way and that, tearing her clothes, but only getting her more involved.

'Wait!' ordered Michael. 'We've got to get this organized or Sally will sink beneath a brambly wave.'

'Loss of the *Saucy Sally*,' spluttered she, head downwards. 'Hurry up, I'm eating the stuff.'

So Michael got as near the edge as he could without going in too, and clasped her round the waist. Then Pat clasped him and they pulled. With rending and tearing and squeaks of protest, she slowly came out backwards until she was sitting, a pathetic sight, on the grass.

'Whew!' was her only comment, and then: 'Lucky I've still got my clothes on!'

'Well,' Michael answered, 'I'm not sure I should say you *have* got them on, or your skin, either.'

She was scratched from head to foot, and little streams of blood were trickling about her. Her skirt was torn with several jags, and her aertex blouse hung in ribbons from her shoulders.

'I'll tie these clothes on. There's no point in changing; it might happen again,' she said.

'You'd better wash, and do up that cut on your arm,' said Michael, and they went indoors to repair her. It was then they decided that they were thirsty.

'How does this lemonade work?' Pat called from the kitchen, and Sally shouted back:

'Shovel in three large spoonfuls of powder and fill the jug with water,' as Michael attended to her injuries.

Half an hour later they went back to work, and by lunch time, which was to-day two-thirty, they were approaching the real jungle half-way down the field. They all felt very full and sleepy after lunch, but looking at the length of ditch still to be cleared, they decided to go on.

And now the real work began. The bushes were so thick above the ditch that the only thing to do was to tunnel through. This meant working in a very cramped position, and it was impossible for more than one at a time to go in. So they fetched two pairs of sécateurs, and Sally started from one end and Michael from the other, while Pat collected the refuse from each in turn.

In this way they made good progress, and it was much less difficult than they had anticipated, because, though the brambles grew thickly overhead, it was the dead and withered pieces that fell into the ditch,

rather than any live growth, and it was too dark for the great tufts of grass and sprouts from trees which flourished further up the field. What really held them up was that they had to come out frequently for rests and their hands were getting red and sore; however, they managed pretty well, taking turns in the tunnel.

It was only about an hour and a half after they had started that Michael and Sally were at work and Sally called out:

'Here! We're meeting!' And a second later both their sécateurs caught at the same piece of bramble.

'Hi! That's mine,' Michael said.

'Tisn't,' answered Sally, and tugged firmly; so firmly that she retired ungracefully on to the pile behind her which Pat was busy collecting.

'Oh, Sally,' said Pat crossly, 'can't you look out?'

'I can't,' she answered. 'I'm stuck. Take me and the pile will come too.'

'Here, let me help.' Michael joined in to make the muddle worse, and in the excitement forgot that he could not stand up, and attempted to do so. Actually the hedge here was very thin, and instead of getting firmly attached to the ceiling, he bumped his head on a small branch. At once the children were showered with little pellets. Sally picked up one from under her chin.

'Crab apples,' she said, and took a bite. Then she made a wry face and spat it out.

'But we can make jelly. Let's collect them.'

'How?' They looked up dubiously at the lower branches of the tree, through a curtain of undergrowth.

'What about shaking?' Sally suggested. They shook, but Michael had brought down the majority of the loose apples, and only one or two more bumped down now, and slid into the ditch.

'I vote we get out and prospect from on top,' Michael said. 'Anyway, I'll be in this position for ever if I stay here much longer.'

They all felt rather like that, so they pulled and heaved Sally off her pile, further destroying her clothes, and then crawled out of the ditch.

'Whew!' Michael stretched. 'Let's go and see what it looks like from outside.'

They went down the path that led through the bushes to the creek and, half-way down, stopped.

'There it is,' Sally said.

It was a tiny tree, the top only just coming above the brambles. They could see one or two red apples glinting in the sun.

'Well, we can't get at it from here,' Pat said, craning on tiptoe to see.

'Be easiest from the field next door. In fact, I think the tree is in the field. Who does it belong to? That old sailor Pete talked of, I suppose. We might get them at night.'

Michael was determined to have the apples somehow.

'Yes, but if the apples lean over the ditch, they're ours, wherever the tree is growing. It's the law,' Sally said, and added: 'And I'm not getting them from his field. I'd feel awful.'

'So should I,' agreed Pat.

But Michael brightened up.

'Well, as far as I can see most of them do lean over the ditch, and we can easily make the others with a walking-stick.'

This seemed to satisfy Sally's and Pat's consciences, so they started off to the house for walking-sticks and basin, and Michael explained his plan of action.

'We'll go along the ditch to the place, and then hack a platform on the bank where we can stand, and then I should say we could get them all right.'

And that is what they did. Sally and Michael then stood on the platform, sometimes falling back into the bushes and sometimes falling forward and slithering into the ditch, and Pat crouched below picking up the apples and providing a cushion for Sally or Michael when either of them fell.

First they shook down those which were nearest, and then picked off those which would not shake. Then the walking-stick came into action. Michael would reach out as far as he could, hook a branch, and slowly draw it back until Sally could lean across and pick off the apples.

'Lucky we've got the stick,' observed Pat, who was collecting the apples in a basin. 'All the nicest ones are on the other side.'

'They always are,' Sally answered.

Pat sat down to think about this, and was immediately bombarded by the next batch of apples.

'You shouldn't think,' Sally said when she protested, and showered her with more.

'Well, that's the lot, isn't it, Michael?'

'Er—yes. Yes. I can't see any more. How many have we got?'

'About half a basin full,' Pat shouted up, 'apart from those inside my clothes.'

'Well, we can't use them. You probably haven't washed for weeks. Come on, let's get out.'

Once in the field they looked at the apples. The battered enamel bowl held about a hundred, some round and red, and others looking distinctly moth-eaten. Michael picked out one particularly gnarled specimen.

'I don't see how that's to make jelly.'

'You wait,' said Sally.

'How many jarfuls will we get?' Pat asked.

Sally was not at all sure.

'Well, I should think—hm—I don't really know.'

'Go—on! You're no cook,' Michael scoffed, throwing an apple into the air and catching it.

'Well, you do it, then!' she retorted. 'And, anyway, give me back that apple. Every little counts.' And she added to herself: 'Especially when there's *such* a little.'

'Can't,' Michael answered, 'it's fallen in a cowpad.'

'Oh, Michael, and it was a decent one,' Pat said, bending over and examining it.

Sally put the bowl firmly under her arm and walked on.

'Well, I'm going to cook. You two can do what you like.' She secretly hoped that they would not want to help. Michael and Pat looked relieved.

'If you're *sure* there's nothing we can do——' His voice trailed off.

'No, honestly, thanks.'

'Good. I'll get on with the dinghy. She should be ready by to-morrow. Coming, Pat?'

They went off down to the shore, and Sally went through to the kitchen. She waited until the other two were out of sight and then got down to work. She slipped off her ragged blouse, and put on a flowered overall from the back of the door. Then she tipped the apples into a clean enamel basin full of water in the sink. They rattled in and bobbed about in the water.

'Maggoty,' she murmured, and removed several. Then she swilled them round until the dust, dirt, and insects were floating, and drained off the water, and taking a sharp-pointed knife cut each apple in two and popped it into a saucepan. When they were all ready she covered them with water and placed them on the electric stove, switching the hot-plate to 'medium' so that they would not cook too quickly.

There was nothing to do now until they were cooked, and she wandered into the dining-room. It was really very nice to be alone in the house. She tidied up the room a bit. Pat's bathing towel was on the sofa, and a baby shrimp she had in a jar was on the side-board. There had been a still smaller one with it, but that morning she had found its shell floating on top of the water. The bigger one had eaten it.

'Shrimps are all right cooked,' Michael had remarked, 'but I wouldn't eat one raw even if I were its brother.'

'You would if you were a shrimp, because they do,' Pat had answered, and Sally had said sadly:

'Yes, I forgot they were cannibals. I'd hoped to see them growing.'

'Well, one has grown, only not in the way you expected,' Michael had said.

Sally now looked at that one. It was certainly bigger, and lonely, she thought. She decided to put it back.

There was a violent sizzling in the kitchen; the apples had boiled over. She switched the electric to 'low,' and left the saucepan half on and half off the hot-plate. The apples were getting soft. While waiting for them to become mushy she prepared supper.

There would have to be a lot as they'd missed tea, and she got out sausages, pricked them and put them in the frying-pan, peeled some potatoes, and washed two lettuces.

By then the apples were nearly ready. She went into the downstairs bedroom, and taking two chairs put one upside down on the other. She then placed a bowl on the seat of the upturned chair, and looked round. She had intended to use a sheet to strain the apples, but supposing they stained? She had an idea:

'How silly of me,' she said, and went to fetch a tea-cloth. It would be more convenient, and it would not matter particularly if that did get stained.

She tied one corner to each leg, leaving a bag in the middle, but not such a big bag that when the apples were in it, it would touch the bowl.

Then she went back to the kitchen. She stirred with a wooden spoon. Yes. They were ready, and lifting the saucepan she carried it into the other room.

It was difficult, while pouring the slushy mess into the bag, not to slop it, but with care she managed to guide it all into the right place.

For some moments she watched the liquid going through into the bowl. At first it went in a stream, quickly spreading over the bottom of the bowl, but then the stewed apple settled in the bag and the liquid went through in a steady drip-drip-drip. She was tempted to help it with a spoon, and this would have made more jelly, but if she did this it would not be the lovely clear pink colour that it should be, but would look dirty. So she left it alone and went back to the kitchen.

About twenty minutes later supper was ready. She went and had one more look at the apples. There was quite a large pool now, she saw with satisfaction, and went to ring the bell for the others to come up, which in a few minutes they did.

When taken to look at the apples they gazed admiringly at the pink pool, and then Michael put his finger in.

'I say, but it hasn't jellified,' he said.

Even Pat knew the answer to this.

'Of course it hasn't. That's only the juice. It's got to be cooked yet.' She looked at him with pity.

'Come on,' Sally said. 'The food's keeping hot under the grill.'

'All right, I'll wash,' said Michael, and Pat said: 'I won't,' but on examining her hands decided that perhaps she would.

The meal was very welcome, as they had had a hard day's work. Afterwards they were almost too full and sleepy to wash, but they just managed it, and then went to bed.

Then, in the middle of the night, Sally woke up. She had been dreaming of the jelly and wanted to go and see if it was all right.

'Of course it must be,' she reasoned, 'but I did forget to look at it before going to bed.'

For some time she argued with herself, loath to get out of bed, but wanting badly to make sure. At last she gave way and crept downstairs.

When she went in there was a scuffle and a smothered 'Oh!'

'Who's there?' Sally said, trembling.

'Oh, Sally, I thought you were a burglar.' It was Pat, and she went on: 'I just came to have a look.'

'So did I,' whispered Sally. She turned on a torch and they looked. One drip was going through every minute, and they each dipped a finger into the sticky fluid to taste, and then, well satisfied, went back to bed.

The first thing they did the next morning, when Michael wakened them by gently tipping up the bottom of their beds, was to go and have another look.

The bag was wet with a little brown slush in the bottom, and in the bowl was a pool of pink syrup with a few bubbles round the edge. So far, so good; and while she was boiling the kettle for breakfast Sally boiled up the syrup too, having added nearly half a pound of sugar and a drop or two of lemon essence.

She let it boil for some minutes and then poured it into a jar. It filled a small jar and half a breakfast cup, and looked as if it would set.

Michael and Pat were talking about the dinghy in the dining-room, and Sally joined them.

'Michael says we can go out in her to-day,' Pat told her, and he added:

'Tide's not till seven twenty-one, so it'll have to be this evening.'

'Couldn't we go now?' Sally asked. 'After all, high tide was only an hour ago.'

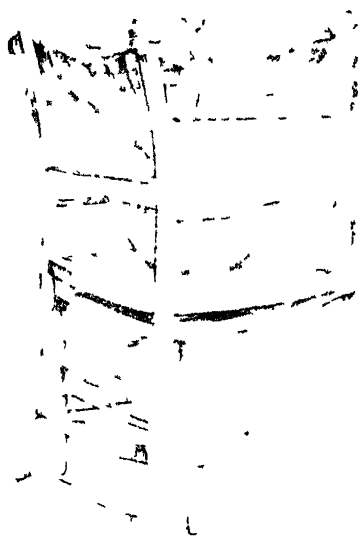
'No, she's not ready yet. I've got to fix up a broken rowlock and paint her name.'

'Oo! What's she called?'

'Wait and see,' he said.

Pat did not want to see the dinghy's name before Sally, so she said:

'I'll stay and help Sally with the housework.'



CHAPTER 5

NAVIGATION

MICHAEL went down to the shore and the other two spent the morning doing housework, and from time to time looking at the jelly, which was setting just as it should.

By eleven they had finished and were lying on the veranda with refreshments. They saw Michael coming up to them, and waved.

'What 's her name?' they both shouted.

'I haven't painted it yet. You 'll see in the evening. Did the jelly set?'

'Um, rather! Come and see.'

Sally led the way into the kitchen. Gently Michael lifted the jar and tilted it first one way and then the other, and then put it down and stood looking.

'It 's amazing!' he said solemnly.

'What 's amazing?'

'Why, that those squidgy little apples turn into this pink stuff, and when we eat the pink stuff it turns into us.'

A thought suddenly struck Sally.

'Yes, but if a cow ate it, it wouldn't turn into us, it would turn into cow.'

'A cow wouldn't eat it,' Pat said, and there seemed to be no answer to this.

'You don't understand what we 're talking about,' said Michael in a superior way, and then in a quite unsuperior way:

'Let 's dig into it.'

It tasted lovely on brown bread and butter.

'You know,' Sally said between mouthfuls, 'we haven't been to see the old sailor yet.'

'We could take him some bread and jelly,' Pat suggested. The other two were a bit doubtful, but Pat was sure he would like it, so they cut a large hunk of bread and spread it thickly with butter and jelly.

Then they went down to the shore and along the top of the sea wall. Beyond the first stile was an old fence with a rickety wooden gate, and inside an orchard led back from the creek. The trees were now loaded with plums and apples.

They unhitched the gate and went down the grassy bank and stood in the orchard. The grass was mown to make a path which led straight to a tiny cottage which they could just see through the trees. The sun shone through the leaves, and it was strangely quiet. Pat shivered and whispered:

'Smugglers.'

'Not now, silly. Come on,' said Michael, and they began to walk toward the cottage.

Suddenly they were hailed from the far end.

'Hall-oh-h!'

'Hallo!' they shouted back. The old man started to walk toward them. He could only be described as belonging in every way to the cottage and garden. He came up beaming under his great walrus moustache.

'Good afternoon, young ladies! Good afternoon, young sir!'

Pat stepped forward.

'We've brought you this,' she said, and held out the bread and jelly. It looked small in his huge hand, but he seemed pleased.

'Well done!'

They were to learn that The Old Man, as he was called on the island, always showed satisfaction by these two words, making them sound as one: 'Well done.' He went on:



'Now that was a kind thought. It looks like apple jelly. I'm fond of that.'

'Yes. Crab apples,' Pat said proudly.

'Oho! Crab apples?' He looked at them with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Now there's a crab-apple tree the far side of the farm. You wouldn't have found that one, surely?'

'No,' they answered slowly.

'And then there's a crab-apple tree in the hedge, the far side of my field, next to your garden. You *might* have found that one.'

There was silence.

'Ye-es.'

He threw back his head and let out a roar of laughter. His whole huge body shook, and the orchard became light and sunny with his pleasure. It was all right. Then the children started to laugh too.

The Old Man turned round and walked toward the cottage with a slight roll from side to side, suggestive of his many years at sea.

'Ah, you rascals. You young little-be-good ruffians! Come along in! Come along in!'

And they followed him up the path.

'Now, mind your heads. Well done. Straight in—no, never mind that sail—sit down, find yourselves chairs. Well done, well done.'

He guided Sally and Pat into chairs, told Michael to sit on the table, and lowered himself into an old oilcloth-covered arm-chair.

'Well!' He smiled round at them. 'This is good. Now we know each other.'

'Oh, yes.' Sally put on her party manners. 'That's Pat. That's Michael, and I'm Sally.'

'And,' Pat added, 'we'd rather like to know about the smugglers.'

'Oho!' This drew a long chuckle from The Old

Man. 'So that's what you're after. Who told you there'd been any smugglers here?'

'Pete told us,' Michael said. 'He told us about a fisherman called Rob, and he killed an excise officer in this cottage.'

'Ye-es. In this room.'

'Oo-er!' Pat shivered excitedly and they all three looked round the dark little room, with something smelling good on the hob, and photographs and pictures on the walls, mostly of ships in which The Old Man had sailed. It was scrupulously clean and tidy, except for a sail lying on the floor and half over the table, which The Old Man was mending. There were the pictures and a pile of sailing magazines, but apart from these nothing showed it to be the room of a sailor. The room needed nothing; no one could have lived in it but a seafaring man.

'Yes,' said The Old Man, 'in this room. He would have been standing here, or perhaps in that back room—there's a small scullery out there'—he pointed toward a latched door in the corner of the room—'working by the lantern. It was a winter night, you see. And he heard this knock at the door. He'd know all right it wasn't one of his friends, perhaps he'd heard the poor drunken fellow coming up the path, so anyway, he takes his gun and places himself inside the door, and calls out:

"Who is it?" And the fool answers:

"It's me, Rob Jagers, and I've come to arrest you for being a rotten snivelling smuggler."

'Well, Rob could hear he was drunk, and opens the door, and the lantern shines out on the officer.

"Oh!" says Rob. "Come in, then. Come in, officer. Are you alone? Any friends with you?"

'Now his voice was all smooth, but the officer was too far gone to hear that it was false, and answers:

“No, I’m alone, I’m come along to fetch you off to where you belong.”

‘And he steps in, just there, by the front door. And Rob tells him to come along and sit by the fire. Of course it was an open fire then, I had the stove put in. So there they sit, the tall redhead fisherman and the little drunk officer, in the firelight, and no doubt his friends at the pub, “The Oak Tree” up the village, getting a bit nervous, wondering if they hadn’t been fools not to stop him by force. Well, presently, Rob leans over and touches his arm.’

The Old Man here leant forward, and the children held their breath.

“Officer,” he says, “it’s a dark night. Did any one see you come up this lane?”

“No,” says the little chap, a bit fuzzled and sleepy now.

“All right,” says Rob. “No one’ll see you go down again, either.” And with that he stands up and the little man sees the gun in his right hand, and feels Rob’s other hand picking him up as if he’d been a bit of sacking, and Rob lifts him over to the door and puts a bullet through his head.’

There was silence in the room, until Sally broke it, almost whispering:

‘And then he buried him in the creek?’

‘That’s right,’ said The Old Man. ‘Of course, they all knew he’d done it, but there wasn’t any evidence, and they couldn’t find the body. It was better not to investigate too closely either. Wait now, wait a minute.’

The Old Man heaved himself out of his chair and opened the bottom drawer of the chest near him. The drawer was full of papers and magazines and pictures.

At last he drew out one from the bottom and took it to the window.

'There he is. That 's Rob. Well, well, I haven't looked at that since—not since—must have been over seven years ago when young Jim at the farm would come pestering me for stories. He was a young demon, always in trouble——'

But the children were staring at the picture of the man with a lean brown face and auburn hair and beard and dark sullen eyes. The portrait was painted crudely against a sea-green background and suggested mystery and daring.

Pat looked round. She could almost feel him standing behind her.

Being over six feet, his shoulders and head would be slightly bowed. Dressed in dark blue seaman's sweater and trousers, lean and sinewy, he would be in direct contrast to The Old Man, in a short-sleeved tattered shirt, breeches unlaced at the knee, no socks, and dirty white canvas shoes, with his great sun-burnt head, kindly grey eyes, and untidy moustache covering his upper lip like an umbrella.

Michael broke in on her reverie:

'Come on, Pat. We 're going to see the window.'

They trooped through the door opposite the front door, noting the scullery where Rob had worked, and went up the dark narrow stairs between two walls. At the top there was a tiny landing with a door to the right and a window straight ahead. It was only about a foot square and now looked out on a hedge through which they could see faintly a muddy pool.

'Careful,' The Old Man said. 'We don't want you falling down the stairs,' and he pushed Pat in front of him and stood at the head of the stairs. Then, pointing over their shoulders, explained how the window had been used.

'Now, before that hedge had grown and the pear-tree beyond it, you can see for yourselves there 'd be

a clear view straight across the harbour, all along the main channel and over the creeks this side of the harbour. There's only one better view and that's out of your house, but then your patch of ground was a swamp.'

'Was it?' Sally said in astonishment.

'Oh, yes, it's only been reclaimed in the last thirty years. Well, Rob or one of the others would stand on this landing and hold a lantern when it was clear for the boats to come in. And if it was dangerous he'd move it up and down. Now, excuse me, young sir——' He pushed past Michael. 'You see that pond down there?'

'Yes?'

'Well, sometimes there'd be a sudden search, or the boats would get in late and they'd plant the kegs in that pond before taking them to the mainland. It was deeper than it is now.'

They peered at the pond.

'But weren't they ever found out?' Sally asked.

'Well, you see, every one *knew* about it, but it was hard to catch them at it. There were only a few fishermen here then, and a farmer or two, a parson, and a few of the gentry, but they were all in it. Every one on the island and round the harbour was. One or two got killed or taken now and again, but it didn't really disappear till the place opened up, and the builders came. Well, that's about all, and I must go down and see to me apple pudding.'

They followed him down silently.

'Thanks awfully,' Michael said, and the others added their thanks.

The Old Man bent over his pudding.

'You're welcome. Come again, come again. I'm always here, or in the boat. Oh, and now what about a sail? Would you like to come out?'

Would they like to go! A torrent of thanks came out:

'How lovely!' 'Thanks most awfully,' and 'Oh, *can we?*'

And out of this muddle came Sally's practical question:

'When shall we come?'

'Well now, the tide's at seven twenty-one this evening, so we could get away about six and be back about eight, but that wouldn't be too good as it's a low tide and there's not much wind. Wait a minute now, I'll get me tide-table.'

He rummaged in his papers, searching for the tide-table.

'We can go out in the dinghy this evening, can't we?' Pat whispered, and Michael nodded. He and Sally, too, were relieved that The Old Man could not take them this evening.

'Here we are! Now.' He studied the small brown card.

'In two days we could have a good sail and the tide is thirteen feet seven inches. You be down at my pier at eight-forty in the morning and we'll see what we can do.' The pier was a wooden jetty sticking into the creek opposite the cottage.

Pat skipped with joy, and they were just going down the path when The Old Man called:

'Have you got one of these?' and waved the tide-table.

'No. We haven't,' Michael answered.

'All right. Wait a minute. I'll get you one.'

He went into the cottage, and then came out with a card similar to that which they had seen before. It was covered with columns of figures.

'To get the tide on any particular day, you find your date here—then run your finger along until you

reach September, and there 's the morning tide, five-seventeen; and the evening, six twenty-one. But you add an hour for Summer Time, so you get six-seventeen a.m. and seven twenty-one p.m. and a rise in water of twelve feet eight inches.'

They pored over him while he showed them how to find the tide, and then Michael took charge of the tide-table.

They said their final good-byes and The Old Man ambled back into his cottage, while they hurried home, proudly placed the treasured tide-table in a position of honour on the Welsh dresser, and began to prepare for the evening expedition.

Two hours before high tide they stood down on the shore, armed with a picnic basket. The water had not yet come up as far as the dinghy and she lay quietly on the stones.

Pat looked at the name painted on her bows, and then out over the harbour and up at the sky where a few long crispy clouds trailed across the blue.

'*Silent* is a lovely name,' she said. 'What made you think of it?'

'Well, I was going to call her *Lonely*. I thought of that the other day when it was very hot and still and suddenly a gull cried in the marshes, but *Silent* seemed better for a boat.' Then in a burst of impatience he went on: 'Oh, come on, let 's push her out. The tide will never get up here.'

'Yes, do let 's,' they answered, and dumped the basket in *Silent*. Then they all started to push.

Silent jerked unevenly over the shore toward the water, grinding the pebbles beneath her, and then slithered into the mud, and the children followed sloshing ankle-deep and pushing her ahead of them. It was only a few yards to the water; she dipped her bows in rather shyly, and then Michael gave her a

final shove and she was proudly and gently rocking in a few inches of water.

Michael gazed at her in admiration. She was hardly recognizable as the battered forlorn little vessel for which he had paid ten shillings.

'You two get in. I'll push off. Pat forrard, Sally aft,' he commanded.

They hastily swished their feet in the water to get them clean, and then hopped in.

'Will she sink?' Pat asked, peering round for leaks.

'Of course not, silly!' retorted Michael desperately,



hoping that she would not, and Sally put in comfortingly that it wouldn't matter if she did here, and anyway the food was in tins, so it would not get wet.

'Oh, shut up!' said Michael, and gave an unexpectedly violent push, whereupon Pat sat down ungracefully in the dinghy and not in the sea, by luck rather than good management.

Then Michael clambered in and took his place as *Silent* glided across the water. They all waited, half

expecting her to gurgle and go to the bottom, but she remained serenely afloat, and with a grin of pride Michael seized the oars.

'Good!' he said to no one in particular, and started to row.

There was a very slight breeze helping them, but the water was smooth, and they went along quickly toward the mouth of the creek.

Michael rowed happily in silence and Sally trailed her hand in the water feeling the delicious coolness. Pat knelt in the bows and peered over. At first she kept turning quickly from side to side, but Michael told her curtly to 'trim the vessel.'

'What's that?' she asked.

'Keep in the middle so that the weight is evenly distributed. We get along quicker and won't sink,' he answered.

After that she stayed quite still, trimming the vessel, until suddenly she saw something out of the corner of her eye, and bounced to one side.

'Look, Sally, oh, look!' she shrieked, and Sally, too, craned over.

Michael angrily told them to get back, as *Silent* was weighed down perilously low on her starboard side.

'Sorry, but it's a gorgeous jelly-fish—in action,' Sally said over her shoulder.

This was too much even for Michael. He stopped being a sailor and joined them as they watched the jelly-fish lazily drifting past. It was the size of a man's fist, clenched, and had red and blue tentacles which moved slowly in the water. Its body was streaked with red and blue and yellow like a glass marble. It was moving quite aimlessly with the tide, and so, Michael realized, were they.

'Come on,' he said, 'only do be careful you two, or

you 'll have us all in the water. Sally, you look over to port and Pat starboard, and then we 'll be balanced properly.'

'Which is port?' asked Pat, pretending she didn't know.

'Left,' Michael answered, and began once more to row.

Sally and Pat carried on a conversation from their different sides. There was about three feet of water where they were now, and though it was getting deeper they could see the mud bottom perfectly.

'Oo, Sally, I've got a lot of fish, swarms of them, tiny ones. I think they're shrimps.'

'Not likely, out here,' Sally answered. 'Oh, I've got them now. No, they're baby bass or mullet, I'm not sure which. Oh, Michael, do stop a minute, there's two crabs fighting.'

'Let me see,' demanded Pat, and forgetting about balance hurled herself over to Sally's side.

Michael said nothing, but rowed harder to get past the crabs.

They were now out by the oyster beds. The creek was fairly narrow here, and down the centre the mud had been levelled so that there were six oblong platforms, or 'beds,' sixty feet by fifty feet. And here oysters were cultivated. The beds were above low-water mark, but slightly built up at the sides so that when the tide went out there was enough water left to cover the oysters. At the sides were dams so that when necessary they could be drained. Now they were covered by about eight feet of water.

Sally and Pat gazed down. They could not see so clearly as in the shallower water, especially as a breeze was ruffling the surface. It looked as if they were going over pebbly ground.

At the far end of the oyster beds there was a bend

round a point of marshland which jutted into the creek; this was not yet covered by water.

'I say, look,' Michael said quietly, and leant on his oars.

'What?' The others looked where he pointed. On the mud of the point was a large bird with something beside it which flapped.

'Greater black-backed gull. What's he got?' Sally murmured.

'I don't know. Shall we go nearer?' said Michael.

'Well, not much, and go quietly.'

Sally and Pat remained quite still, hardly breathing, while Michael slowly and carefully dipped the oars in and manœuvred the boat about ten yards nearer.

'That's enough,' breathed Sally, and he stopped.

'It's a flat-fish,' said Pat.

They watched intently and the gull returned their stare, looking at the fish every now and then to make sure it was still within reach. The poor thing was flapping about trying to find the water. Obviously the gull was unnerved by this interruption to his meal, but did not wish to leave it.

'Go on gently, Michael, or he may fly away.'

Michael took up the oars and went on slowly. This puzzled the gull. Was he being attacked? No, he decided, and anyway he was the master of the marshes. So, stalking up to the fish, he tossed it a few inches inland.

'Oh!' gasped Pat.

'Fishes can't feel,' Sally said.

The gull had turned his back on them, and was keeping guard over his fish. And, as they rounded the point, so did he turn, always presenting them with his back. Then he turned round and studied them. They were clearly getting further away, and were no danger to him.

'He's got a guilty conscience,' said Michael, and they all laughed. He certainly did look uncomfortable, almost as though he were blushing.

Then, turning his back once and for all, he began flicking the fish toward the grass where he could devour it.

'That's the end of Mr. Fish,' said Pat, and Michael rowed vigorously to make up for lost time, while Sally looked back to watch as the gull disappeared.

'Are those the gulls they call "policemen"?' Michael asked.

'Yes, they keep all the other gulls in order, or perhaps it's because of their black backs, I don't know,' answered Sally.

'Well, the other day when I was working on *Silent*, there were a couple of gulls squawking about with a bit of bread, and suddenly one of those chaps swooped down and carried off the bread. But they were fighting so hard they didn't notice it had—golly! what's happened?'

With a smooth but very final jolt they had stopped. They all three leaned over.

'We're on a mudbank,' said Pat.

Michael looked accusingly at Sally.

'You had the chart,' he said.

'I know, but I forgot to look at it. At least I didn't realize there'd be anything to look for.'

Michael was gazing into space and Sally thought he was angry, so she went on apologetically:

'Well, there isn't really, you know. This chart is for low tide, and it's nearly high now.' Then she had an idea. 'Anyway, we can push off backwards and go round.'

'I know,' he said, grinning. Sally was puzzled.

'Well, why were you angry?'

'Wasn't. I was having a rest, and listening to you

exposing your ignorance on the subject of charts. Of course they're made at low water, just so that you *can* see where the bumps of mud are, and the channels.'

'Well! Here, Pat, help me to tip the beast overboard.'

And as Sally attacked him from in front, Pat fell on him from behind, and the dinghy became the scene of a hilarious struggle.

At length Michael gave a particularly violent shove and suddenly saw daylight after having been smothered in Sally's clothes.

'Victory!' he yelled, and turned his attention to Pat. But Sally in her backward lurch had overbalanced, and one leg was in the water.

'Ow! I'm drowning!' she bawled delightedly as her leg plunged in.

Pat glanced up to make sure that this was not an accurate statement, and then continued to pummel Michael's head.

Sally's foot, however, had reached the mud, and in her effort to get back she had loosened *Silent's* bows. Now *Silent* was drifting toward the deep water with Sally hopping alongside, one leg in and the other out.

'Michael, really. Here, help!' she called, and the other two looked up, but only to roar with laughter at her difficult position.

But when she too began to laugh, and really was in danger of falling out, they lunged toward her. Michael took her round the waist while Pat grabbed her clothes, and together they hauled her in until she lay sprawling across the boat and them.

'Well, at least I got us off the mud,' she said, when they were all seated again.

'Um, I suppose we must grant you that,' Michael answered. 'Now we'll go carefully round the hump. Pat, keep a look-out ahead.'

'It's awfully difficult to tell whether it's deep enough.'

'Well, *look*, you ape,' he answered unhelpfully.

It did not occur to him that by this time the tide had come in far enough for them to go straight across the top. They had only stuck on the crest of the hump. It did occur to Sally, but by that time they were three quarters of the way round. She giggled.

'What is it?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing,' she answered.

From now on the journey went smoothly. They passed three more beacons, long poles marking the channel, and then came to the entrance to the creek. This had a beacon on each side, about two hundred yards apart, one with an old fishing basket on top, and the other a tin can. Once past these beacons, they were in the main channel of the harbour, and the water was a little rough. *Silent* bounced up and down, and on each stroke of the oar Michael caught the crest of a little wave, which came splashing in so that Pat was well sprayed and his back was drenched.

'I say, are you sure we ought to come here? I mean there might be currents and things.' Sally looked round nervously.

'I'm not sure,' he answered, and rested his oars.

'We'd better go back,' suggested Pat.

'I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go up that little creek there.' Michael pointed to a creek that ran inland, divided from their own by a stretch of marsh. It looked very inviting and wound back through woods.

It was hard work getting the dinghy round that point of land. She was buffeted about, while Michael's heroic rowing seemed to bring him hardly any nearer to the next-door creek.

Pat looked ahead and wondered if they could make

it safely. It seemed as if they were drifting backwards, but not into their own creek: into the main channel where the waves, though only small, seemed terrifyingly big from the point of view of a small dinghy. She looked back nervously and caught Sally's eye over Michael's shoulder. Sally saw her with her wet cotton dress clinging to her and her hair sopped; she was also a little nervous, but she smiled, and called: 'O.K.?'

'Rather.' Pat grinned back and they both looked at Michael in silence.

He was red and hot, and pulling with all his strength, but he knew well enough that they were drifting into the main body of water. He was breathing heavily, and very tired.

'Shall I have a try at rowing?' Sally asked.

Michael thought for a minute. Sally had rowed once or twice on the river, and seemed to be fairly capable, and he was beginning to feel as though he could not go on.

'Well, all right,' he said. 'You can dig the oars in deeper than in the river, but not too deep. Pull hard with the right oar and that'll get us back in our creek.'

He sat down wearily in the stern, while she tried to get the clumsy oars under control.

'Oh, hurry up, Sall,' breathed Pat. They were some way out in the main channel now, and drifting past the entrance to the creek. They were already abreast of the tin can. It was really only such a little way, if Sally had the strength.

'Pull, Sally, pull! Your right oar!' Michael shouted.

But Sally was finding the manipulation of two oars difficult enough, without the added strain of directing extra weight to one of them. She battled against the

choppy waves, hitting and beating them in an effort to dig the oars in and get a stroke.

Michael was a little rested now, but they were half-way across the gap, and approaching the basket beacon.

'Here, I'd better take over,' he said, and started up to change places.

But Sally felt she was getting the rhythm of it, and was sure she could head them into the creek.

'No, I've got it.'

'Don't be an ass! We've passed the beacon, and there soon won't be enough water.'

'Shut up!' she shouted, and frantically dug the right oar in; but she dug too deep. It shot up and caught her in the chest, throwing her backwards on to Pat, and the oar, out of its rowlock, began to slide into the sea.

Michael threw himself forward to save it, but was too late; it was floating, and, down by the bows, they had shipped half a dinghy of water. Recovering himself, he went right astern and sat on the gunwale, while Pat and Sally sorted themselves out, and evened the weight. Then, seizing the tin of food, he emptied the contents, and began bailing hard.

'The oar's gone!' he shouted.

Sally and Pat took over the bailing, while he tried to recover the lost oar with the one they still had. But, weighed down as they were, they were moving less rapidly than the floating oar, and were now divided from it by about ten yards.

Michael glanced round to estimate their position. They had been drawn thoroughly into the main channel where the waves were tipped with white horses, because the breeze was against the tide. On the other hand, they were getting rid of the water faster than they were shipping it.

But Sally had seen something.

'Look! Look over there!'

They all turned and saw, about half a mile away, a small motor boat heading down-channel. They would be seen if only they could attract attention.

'I'll bail, you two shout,' Michael ordered.

So Sally and Pat waved and screamed, but the motor boat steadily pursued her course until she was far astern of them and it was obvious that they would not be seen.

Michael looked at the other two, who looked back dejectedly. What were they to do?

It would be no good trying for the creek. And the ominous thing was that they could not now let themselves drift to the small bay about two miles away at the end of the main channel, because it must be about high tide. At any minute the tide might turn; the water would flow out quickly, helped by the breeze, and they, with only one oar, would be swept out to sea with no chance of branching into their creek. At the harbour mouth the tide ran at six knots and, because of currents and whirlpools, no small boat without an engine could survive.

All the time he was thinking he was rowing with the port oar, trying to keep her as much inshore as possible. Why, on a day like this, were no boats about? Then he remembered: they would all be attending the regatta a few miles up the coast.

He glanced at Sally and Pat, whose faces were very white. What on earth could he do?

'O God, *please* help me,' he muttered, and once more looked round desperately. Then he saw something; standing quietly rocking in what to her was a gentle sea, about a quarter of a mile up-channel, was the *Louisiana*, the smuggling ship.

CHAPTER 6

SMUGGLERS

MICHAEL stopped rowing. It seemed too good to be true.

'I say,' he said, 'we'll be all right. We'll drift into *her*,' and he indicated her to the others. He well knew the small chance of achieving this, but when he saw the relief in their faces he almost felt they were there. He knew inside himself that they would get there.

There was little water in the dinghy now, and they stopped bailing.

'We'll get right into the channel and head for *her*. A bit of water will come in, and you'll have to bail,' he said.

'O.K.,' they answered, and waited; it was going to be all right.

'I thought the tide was turning,' Michael remarked. 'But it's running too fast. Must be another few minutes yet.'

'We're nearly in line with *her*, Michael. Hadn't you better row, or we'll drift too far across?' Sally said.

'No, that's all right. Now we're in the stream, it will carry us straight on.'

Indeed they were now only about a hundred yards away. Michael transferred the oar to the starboard rowlock and anxiously guided *Silent* a little nearer the waiting yacht. Then taking the oar out, he told Sally to come forward.

'I'll use this to steer,' he said, and dipped the blade of the oar over the stern.

At once, by a slight but certain degree, the dinghy headed toward the yacht.

'We'll come up on her lee side,' he said. 'Be ready to grab anything you can. Steady us against her side with your hands, and get the anchor chain. You *must* stop her. I'll go straight in. It won't hurt.'

They waited, alert. Nearer they drifted and nearer. The side of the yacht loomed over them.

'Now!' Michael yelled, and they threw out their arms, flattening the palms of their hands against the side of the yacht.

'Can't—hold—on,' Pat gasped, as they were sucked ahead.

Michael leapt to help. He stretched up and grasped a port hole, but was nearly dragged out of the dinghy, and had to leave go.

'Got it!' Pat yelled triumphantly, and seized the anchor chain. Her hands were torn at first, but Sally rushed to her aid, and Michael followed, nearly upsetting them.

'Leave go, Pat, and give us the painter.'

Quickly Pat picked up the rope lying in the bows, and Michael made fast to the *Louisiana's* anchor chain.

Then slowly, very slowly, the *Louisiana's* bows swung round, with *Silent* in attendance.

'Tide's turned,' said Michael. 'Just in time! Well, I don't know about you two, but I'm going on board this time.'

He stood up carefully and, gripping the deck, scrambled on board. Then he leant over and helped Pat up. Sally handed such food as she thought worth saving to her, and prepared to climb up herself. She did not find it as easy as the others had done, and the first time slipped back into *Silent*. But the second time she nearly managed it, and Michael urged her on.

'Come on, Sally!'

'Ugh!' gurgled she, bent double over the deck-rail, her legs kicking overboard.

Michael and Pat laid hold of her top half, gave a final heave, and she lay gasping on the deck.

'The trouble is you 're such a lump. We 're always having to haul you out of difficulties.'

Michael looked at her scornfully. She certainly was just a little bulky.

'I'm comparatively small,' she answered indignantly, and then hastily added: 'I mean when you compare me with June.'

June was a truly terrific school friend.

'Well! June! The whole Grange family put together couldn't compare with her. Anyway, let's explore.'

They leapt up, completely restored, and before going down into the cabin Michael glanced overboard. Yes; *Silent* was still there. He ran over to the others, who were looking a little doubtfully at the steep ladder leading to the cabin, with no hand-rail.

'Backwards down. I'll go first and attend to the casualties which follow,' said Michael. He had often been up and down ladders, and was rather proud of the way he rattled down this one.

Then Pat started cautiously. Half-way she turned and held out a hand; Michael took it and she jumped, banging her head on the decking.

'Ouch!'

'I knew that would happen,' Michael said casually.

'You brute!' said Pat, rubbing her head.

Michael turned to help Sally, but she had managed alone and now stood between them.

'Where are the niches?' she asked.

They climbed on the bunks, Pat on one side and Sally and Michael on the other.

'Look behind the curtain,' Pat said, drawing aside a neat blue curtain above the bunk.

But this only revealed empty bookshelves. They were slightly puzzled and looked round for other possible places.

'Under the floor?' murmured Sally.

'No.' Michael frowned in thought. 'Pete said the cabin was lined. He must have meant the walls.'

The trouble was that they were not certain what they were looking for.

'Well, perhaps they are behind the curtains, but hidden,' suggested Sally. She drew her finger along the surface of the boards.

'Oo! half a sec.—ah, what did I tell you?'

'Nothing,' said Michael, and they all crowded on to the bunk, and looked at the little slots behind the sliding panel. These were, of course, quite empty.

'I wonder if there's any left?' Pat said excitedly, poking her finger to the extremity of the slot.

'We must keep an eye on her, Sally,' said Michael, winking. 'It's a pity to become a drug fiend at the age of twelve.'

'I say, we can't stay here for ever,' Sally observed.

'No. Here, Pat, stop thinking about drugs and attend. We've one half-hearted dinghy, but soon there'll be no water to row her in, anyway. The tide's zooming out.'

'Well, we'd better see if there's any food in the boat if we're in a state of siege. Ours is wet, except the sardines. The tomatoes might be all right—a bit brackish and trodden on, perhaps.'

'Stop being funny,' Michael said. 'We'll have to camp here to-night, anyway. High tide's about eight to-morrow, and unless someone sees us before ten we'll have lost another tide.'

'Oh, we 'll be seen before ten,' said Pat. 'I mean we couldn't help it.'

'It's the seers who do the helping, not we,' Sally said.

'It 'll be all right. It will!' Michael burst in. 'The boats will come in from the regatta to-morrow on the early tide, and they 'll all pass us on their way to Tilworth.'

Tilworth was the little town at the end of the main channel.

'Good. That's settled. Now for a meal,' said Sally.

The meal was eaten in the cabin and consisted of sardines, wet tomatoes, and some baked beans which had been left behind. But there was no tin-opener, so they had to puncture and lever open the tins with Michael's knife.

'This is jolly messy. They might have left something for us to wipe on,' he said, looking round for a cloth.

'I suppose the customs, or whoever it was, took off everything for identification.'

'Um, but that doesn't help.'

'I say,' said Pat, 'couldn't we dry the bread on deck and then at least we 'll have something to put the rest of the sardines on in the morning?'

'No. It 'll taste foul after floating in *Silent*. Anyway, the sardines will probably be bad in the morning. It's so muggy,' Sally said.

'Well, in that case we simply must attract attention before breakfast.' Michael was quite firm about this.

'How shall we wake up?' Pat wanted to know.

'Oh, we just will. Anyway, how are we going to sleep? There's only two bunks, and not room for two in one.'

'We could take a mattress off and lay it on the table,' Sally suggested.

'Huh! Nice and comfortable for the person on the demattressed bunk. Actually I think I'll sleep on deck. It would be a bit warm with three of us in here. I'll go up and prospect.'

He went, darkening the cabin for a moment as he climbed the ladder.

'Shall we do that too?' Pat asked.

'You can if you like. I'm staying here. I've often slept out, but never in a cabin.'

'All right—help me lift off this mattress, and I'll take it up. Michael can sleep on our coats. It must be nearly bedtime now.'

Sally looked out of the tiny slits of windows above the bunks.

'Yes. It's darkish. We spent ages over supper.' She clambered on to the bunk and took hold of the top end of the mattress. As she did so she felt something slightly resistant under her hand. It did not feel quite like a lump of mattress, and she pressed her fingers in.

'I say, Pat. It feels as if there's something inside.

'What?' Pat leaned over eagerly.

'I don't know. Probably nothing.' But nevertheless she excitedly examined the mattress to see where they could undo a seam. 'Oh, I see. It's the press-fastener kind.' She ripped open the fasteners down one side and slid in her arm. 'It is something.' She drew out an old daily newspaper.

Pat's face fell. 'Oh, what a shame!'

'There may be something in it,' said Sally, and looked at the top page, but there was nothing except news there. Then they laid it on the table. Not until they came to the back page were they rewarded. Pat

suddenly planted her finger on the 'Personal' column. There was a pencil mark against the entry:

'Have found you at last. Will do everything.—
B. S.'

They looked at each other, puzzled.

'Anything else?'

Again they scanned the page. There was another pencil mark against an advertisement.

'Astella Soap? Whatever can it mean?'

'Probably absolutely nothing,' Sally said. They both looked for further clues, but there were none.

'I say, what's the deathly silence?' Michael came clumbering down into the cabin.

'We've found the smugglers,' said Pat.

'We-ell——' Sally was beginning, and held up the paper, but Michael cut in:

'I say, give me a look; I can't see properly here. Let's take it on deck.'

They went up, but further examination proved fruitless.

'It seems so pointless. I don't believe it's anything to do with them,' Sally said, sitting against the deck-rail and watching the great bank of mud which rolled away from them, softly pink with the last of the setting sun. They were afloat, being right in the channel, and it was cool and quiet except for the cries of a few birds.

'Pointless? Not so, my girl. It's well known that criminals correspond through these personal columns.'

The evening was so lovely that Sally failed to reply, even to this piece of news.

'And what's more——' Michael went on, but stopped in thought.

'What?' asked Pat.

'I'm not sure, but listen. Listen, Sally.'

'Mhm?' She turned round and gave attention.

'If they remember this is here, they'll come back for it.'

'Pete said they wouldn't dare.'

'No. Not to take the ship away. But this is dangerous. It might give them away.'

'Well, why haven't they come before?'

'Either they haven't remembered it or—I don't know——' He shook his head and they remained silent.

Suddenly Sally swivelled round.

'I say,' she said, 'isn't it just on the cards they might come to-night?'

'Why to-night?'

'Well, no one's about. All the boats are at the regatta, and they'd have more chance of doing it unseen.'

Pat's eyes were popping with horror.

'Do you think they might?' she asked nervously.

'They'd probably murder us. We must get away.'

Sally sat back again.

'No, of course they won't. We're always getting excited about fantastic things. We work each other up.'

'Nevertheless——' said Michael, and went to have a look overboard. 'Nothing to be seen,' he called back.

'Well, they wouldn't come 'til it's dark, anyway,' said Pat miserably.

'They won't come at all,' answered Sally. 'And if they did, they'd only want the paper.'

Pat was still not quite happy, and murmured something about being marooned on a ship and waiting to be murdered. Michael came back.

'Listen. I don't want to frighten you, but I feel it would be as well to make a copy of those notices.'

'All right,' said Sally, and as Michael peered at the

paper she took down what he dictated. Then he folded the paper she had written it on, and put it inside his sock, and they put the original back where it had come from.

'I think we'll leave the mattress on the bunk,' Michael said.

'Well, I'm certainly not sleeping in the cabin now,' Sally said. 'I'd rather they found me here than in that horrid little cabin.'

'All right,' said Michael; 'but you'll have to do without a mattress.'

'I couldn't possibly sleep. I'll sit and watch the night,' Pat said.

'Rot! You'll be sleeping like a hog in an hour's time. We're all convinced that they're going to come, but it's only this spooky atmosphere we've made for ourselves. We'll laugh about it in the morning.'

This brought back another adventure to Sally's mind.

'We said that when you were stuck in the mud.'

'I thought you were dying stickily when I came back that time,' Pat said, and Sally and Michael answered together:

'So did I.'

There was a pause.

'And we'll be laughing again to-morrow,' said Michael.

'Ye-es,' they answered a little uncomfortably, and began to look for somewhere to sleep. Michael stretched himself on the deck with his blazer under his head, and the other two sat against the deck-rail and tried to make themselves comfortable.

'I say, Michael, we could get cushions, couldn't we?' Sally asked.

'Yes, I don't see why not,' he answered.

So she went down and brought them up, one for Pat and one for herself.

'There isn't one for you, Michael. Anyway, you're quite comfortable.'

'Am I? Oh, thanks, I wasn't sure,' he said, and they settled down to try and get some sleep.

A few minutes later Pat said quietly: 'I believe Michael would sleep even if we were being murdered.'

'We aren't going to be murdered, Pat. Don't be silly.'

'All right.'

But, nevertheless, neither of them dropped off to sleep easily.

'I'm a wee bit cold, Sally,' Pat murmured, half asleep, some time later.

'So am I. Let's get close.'

They huddled up together, and by about two-thirty were fast asleep.

The wind had dropped, and the moon was shining down on the water as it began to fill the harbour, streaming into the creeks. Occasionally a gull or a curlew cried, but the children did not wake.

At some point, though, Sally was wide awake. She did not remember waking, but at once knew everything. Her heart pounded inside her as she raised herself cautiously and looked overboard. She quickly dropped down again and nudged Pat. There was no time to wake Michael and the two girls waited in horror.

Sally looked at the stars and the peaceful harbour as a dinghy grated against the ship. They heard two men talking softly.

'O.K. so far,' said one, and another reassured him:

'Oh, we'll make it, no danger.'

And they started to scramble aboard. First a leg came over close to Sally and Pat, and then, with a



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slight rocking of the boat, the rest of the man followed. At once he saw the children.

Michael looked white and almost as if he were dead, flat out in the moonlight; but Sally and Pat knew inside themselves that he was awake. They must take their cue from him, and though trembling almost visibly with fear, they clung to each other and pretended to be asleep.

The man leaned over and whispered something to the other in the dinghy. Sally watched him; he was tall and, as far as she could see, handsome. He wore an open shirt and flannel trousers.

As he stood up again she closed her eyes, and listened to the second man climbing aboard. Then came the most horrifying moment of their lives; one man stood over them doing nothing, while the other went to search the cabin, in case there should be any one there.

Sally was pretty certain that they were not going to be hurt, but she could not possibly tell Pat this as they were supposed to be asleep. She half opened her eyes and saw Michael still lying perfectly at ease.

Then the other man came back.

'No one else,' he whispered, and went over to Michael.

The man who had been guarding them came round behind them. Pat gasped in terror, and then, recovering her self-control, turned it into a yawn, as if just waking. At this Sally moved lazily, and stretched. At once the man behind crouched, and they felt his hands over their eyes.

'Ow! Stop it! What are you doing?' Pat began to struggle.

'Shut up, kid.' The man spoke quite kindly. 'Now, don't look round or move, and you'll be all right. I'm going to bandage your eyes.'

This he did, quite loosely, but so that they could

not see anything. Then, very lightly, he tied their hands behind their backs. Meanwhile, the other man had done the same to Michael, who had shown signs of waking when the others had done so.

Then both men drew apart a little and held a conversation in low tones. They evidently decided that one should stay with the children and the other do whatever it was that they had come to do. Sally wondered whether it was the paper. She felt that they should have made a more thorough search.

Then their guard spoke.

'What are you doing here?' he asked conversationally, though a little unnaturally, as though disguising his voice.

Michael answered:

'We lost an oar from our dinghy and were drifting, but managed to come alongside.'

'Mhm.'

The man whistled softly through his teeth for a few moments, and then Michael ventured a plea:

'I say, you got my arms rather uncomforably. Could you help me to sit up?'

'Sorry.' The man bent down and lifted Michael up and settled him. 'Right?'

'Yes, thanks, that 's much better.'

Then the man went on:

'Bit empty you found her?'

'Yes, we couldn't find even a tin-opener.'

'Suppose you made a pretty good exploration?'

'No,' answered Sally, deliberately misinterpreting him. 'It was all right. My brother had a knife and we opened the tins with that.'

The man seemed satisfied and waited in silence until he was joined by his companion, when again they drew apart. Apparently they had got what they wanted. Again their guard spoke.

'Look here, I'm afraid we'll have to sink your dinghy, but you'll be all right—we'll tie a flag to the mast and it'll be seen from the shore in the morning.'

Michael burst in:

'I say, *please* don't. I've spent all the holidays making her seaworthy and we only took her out to-day. Anyway, we've only got one oar.'

'You might not!' Pat added.

'We'll take the other oar, the guard answered. 'That'll do.' And once more they bent down, this time to gag the children. They readjusted the bandages across their eyes, made sure they could breathe, and scrambled overboard. They had tied the children's hands so that they could get free with some effort, but not until the dinghy, with them in her, was some distance down-channel.

The children heard them paddle round to where *Silent* lay, and remove the oar, and then as they pulled off the muffled sound of the strokes grew more and more distant.

They wriggled about trying to free their hands. Pat's and Sally's were tied to the rail, but there was an upright support between them, so they could not help each other. The ship was quiet except for their shuffles and grunts.

In seven minutes Michael was free. The men had overlooked the fact that he was not made fast to the ship, as were Sally and Pat. He heaved himself up and wandered about. The first thing he did was to trip over Sally's feet and go flat on the deck, where he lay face downwards. Then, by dint of rubbing his face up and down, he was able to loosen the bandage round his eyes, and shake it off. He tried to do the same with the gag, but was unsuccessful. However, he was one step on the way.

As the moon was shining he could see clearly and, looking round, decided that the wire of the deck-rail would be the best thing on which to cut himself free, as his hands were only bound with thick string. It was most uncomfortable kneeling beside the rail with his wrists on it, rubbing them backwards and forwards. He had rubbed himself raw before the first strand parted. But then the string slackened a little, and he was able to get one wrist each side of the rail and saw up and down without rubbing his own flesh. It seemed to him that he had been working for hours, and his back and arms ached, when suddenly with a jerk his arms shot down as the string broke, and he was free. He tore his gag off, and fetched out his knife.

'I 'm free,' he said, and went to the others.

It was only a matter of seconds before he had their ropes and bandages off too. They gasped with relief.

'Oo, the beasts!' Pat said, rubbing her mouth.

'Never mind that now,' Michael answered. 'Come on.'

They all went forward and craned over to look after the retreating dinghy. They could not see it, but knew it had gone toward the harbour mouth.

'We can't use the dinghy. One of us must swim for help,' Michael said.

They looked at Pat. She, though the smallest, was the best swimmer. Her heart pounded, but she knew that they were waiting for her to offer to go, and there was no time to be lost.

'I 'll go.'

'Sorry, Pat, but you are the best,' Sally said. 'It 's safe here. Pete said only the mouth is dangerous. Swim obliquely to the shore, up-channel, and the tide will take you.'

They were all three rather frightened, but it was part of their family law that whoever was best fitted for a job took that job on.

Pat was clinging to the outside of the boat.

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, good luck.'

She looked down at the deep water, gently rolling but calm, lowered herself, and slipped into it.

CHAPTER 7

THE CHASE

AT first Pat swam slowly, letting the tide do most of the work. Each small wave was a little bigger, a little slower moving, than in their creek. She was swimming breast stroke, to get accustomed to the rhythm of the incoming water. She knew this was not a waste of time, it was necessary if she were to exert herself to the best advantage over a period of time.

Then, suddenly, her body tautened, her head ducked slightly, and she shot through the water at an unbelievable speed. Her variation of crawl, though not stylish, was very fast. She did not worry about direction, as she knew the water would carry her where she wanted to go. It seemed as though she had been swimming for hours in the dark, for the moon had been covered by clouds. She could not see, though she was aware of, the great mudbanks on either side of the channel. This was something she would remember all her life.

But her enjoyment did not last for long. Through the swish of the running water round her came an ominous sound; it was that of a small but powerful engine.

The details of the situation flashed into her mind at once. It was dark, so they would not see her; as it was only half-tide, the oncoming boat would be in the centre of the channel, and so was she; it must be close or she would not have heard it above the sound of the water.

She stopped swimming and gave a hail, cupping

her hands round her mouth. But it was no good; her voice sounded puny, low down in the vast night, and the rapid chugging did not even pause. It was coming closer and closer. In panic she turned to her left and hurtled through the water. In half a minute she stopped, tried but failed to touch down, and listened. It was nearer, but she was definitely out of its course. Mustering all her strength she again cupped her hands, then, tilting her head back, screamed, took in a deep breath, and let out another piercing, searing scream. It left her exhausted, but she was drawing in breath for a third try when the chugging became slower, there was a slur in the water, and then silence.

‘Hallo! Where are you?’ a man called urgently.

‘Here. I’m all right. I’ll come to you,’ Pat called back, and began to swim toward the boat. The man on board kept calling out to guide her, and in a minute or two she was clutching the side of the boat.

‘Reach up,’ the man said, and she reached. He bent over, took her hands, then elbows, then shoulders, and in one movement had her on board.

‘Aow!’ she gasped. ‘You hurt. Oh! It’s you, Pete.’

‘Yes. Where are the others? We’re searching the harbour for you. Thank goodness——’ But a thought struck Pat.

‘Get going—get going, quick! The smuggling ship.’

‘Why——?’

‘Go on!’ Pat shouted.

‘All right. Switch on.’ He addressed another man whom Pat had not noticed.

‘Good,’ she muttered to herself. Two men would be an advantage. Then feeling tired and weak, she

sat, or crumpled, down on to the deck. At once Pete was by her.

'Here, Pat.' He put a small bottle to her lips. It smelt horrid, but it tilted and she had to drink.

'Ugh!' She spluttered and coughed, shaking her head violently. Pete stood over her.

'Now, Pat, what 's it all about?'

In a few sentences she gave him an outline of their story since they had boarded the *Louisiana*.

'How long ago did you start?'

Pat was silent. She felt unable to judge the time. It seemed hours, but was actually only about twelve minutes.

'Well, not long,' she answered.

'All right. We'll chase them. There's only a chance in a thousand, but we might get them. There's the *Louisiana's* riding light ahead. I say—~~what's~~ happened? It's gone out.'

Pat stirred. There had been a light on board and they hadn't known it. However, this was no time to think about what they might have done. They could already hear faintly the combined yells of Michael and Sally as they tried to attract attention.

The second man, who turned out to be Mr. Potts, the farmer, switched off the engine, and Pete shouted:

'We're coming up on your starboard side. Be ready to jump, and we'll take the dinghy. Pat's here.' Then he turned to Mr. Potts. 'All right, Potts. Switch on.'

They moved slowly toward the *Louisiana*. Pete was in the bows. Suddenly he bellowed a sound like 'Aowah!' and Mr. Potts again slowed down.

'Coming!'

Thud. Michael was on board, and Sally followed. Then they backed away and took the *Silent* in tow. A minute later the *Louisiana* was astern and they were

travelling down-channel. The change-over had been accomplished in the minimum of time; it might have been rehearsed.

Excited questions and answers passed between them, and Michael told how they had only discovered the riding light when the moon went in and it was dark. But in the hurry of hitching it down to attract Pete's attention, they had dropped and broken it.

'I say,' Sally said. 'You know that little dinghy we tried to make see us. Well, that must have been the man who put the light there.'

'Well, I'm blowed. If we'd been a little earlier he would have picked us up.'

'I'm glad we weren't,' Sally said, and turned to Pat. 'How did you get on?' Pat had been strangely quiet, and Sally went on: 'I say, what's wrong?'

'I'm rather cold,' Pat answered, shivering. She had managed to wriggle in under a tarpaulin, but it was hard and draughty.

'Good heavens! What have I been thinking of?' Pete said, and dived forward, returning with a large rag. 'It's oily, I'm afraid, but give yourself a hard rub. Hard as you can.'

Then Pete found an old coat under the decking, and she put on Sally's socks, and in a few minutes was quite warm again.

'Here, have some more of this.' Pete gave her the bottle.

'I don't like it.'

'Never mind. Do as you're told,' he replied mercilessly.

She took a tiny sip.

'Oh, Pete, I really hate it. I'll be sick.'

'Well, if you are, hold your head over to port or it'll blow back on board. But you won't be.'

The others laughed and left her to it. They were

peering through the dark for signs of their prey. Periodically Pete flashed a torch across the water, but there was never anything to be seen except the weirdly shining waves.

'We're getting toward the mouth. D'you think they'll go out, or up the creek?' Mr. Potts asked.

'Well,' Pete answered, 'if they had an engine they might do either. Do you know if they had? They couldn't get out without one.'

'Well, they didn't use it, if they had one,' Michael answered. 'Of course, we didn't see anything.'

Here was a dilemma. Mr. Potts slowed down, just making enough way to prevent them drifting astern, and they stayed where they were with the opening to the sea straight ahead, and creeks leading off on either side of the harbour.

'Of course, if they did have an engine, they'll get clean away. You think it was only a small dinghy?'

'Yes. She rowed pretty lightly. We heard them going.'

'Hm. Well, it won't be the open sea, then. And it's not likely to be our creek, as they'd then have to get off the island. Probably they've tried Spinner's Creek.'

'They'll have to wait a bit for the tide, then. It's too soft to wade through the mud,' Mr. Potts said.

'We'll try it,' Pete answered.

Then, as there was a slight thinning of the cloud and for a moment the harbour was dimly lit up, Sally turned and seized Pete's arm:

'Pete—quick!'

But it was dark again.

'What?'

'I thought I saw something over there.'

'Where?'

'The mouth of Spinner's. I'm not sure.'

'Come on, Potts.'

The boat sprang forward through the water. They watched tensely, Pete scanning the water with his torch.

'How far away, Sally?'

'About a hundred yards, I should think.'

'Well, say a quarter of a mile.' Pete knew how deceptive distance was when looking over the water. Then he spoke to Michael.

'Can you work this boat, if we go off in yours?'

'Yes.'

'All right, get back and have a look at her.'

Michael went astern to Mr. Potts, who showed him the controls.

'I say,' Pat said in alarm. '*Silent* hasn't got any oars.'

'Mm,' Pete grunted, and bending down drew out a pair, and transferred them to *Silent*. He was getting worried; they could not go much further up the creek without grounding, and there was no sign of the other dinghy. He and Mr. Potts would have to go off and search in *Silent*. Of course Sally may have seen anything, a shadow, or a lump of driftwood, or even a dinghy at anchor. No, it was no good, there wasn't a hope. And then the moon came out, and there, not more than thirty yards to starboard, was a dinghy rowing furiously back down the creek toward the harbour.

'Starboard!' rapped out Pete, but contradicted himself. 'No! As you were. Switch off.' Then he called: 'Hallo, there!'

There was no answer, only a more vigorous pulling at the oars.

'Hallo!' he called again.

Silence.

'All right,' he said with a chuckle. 'Slowly astern, Potts.'

They moved astern, nearly parallel with the dinghy, and Pete continued:

'Now, either our friends don't know the creek well, or else they've lost their heads. Ah! As I said.'

With a little jerk the dinghy stopped, tipping half out of the water, and then slowly began to go down by the stern.

'They've holed themselves. Now for a bit of bluff,' Pete said. He waited until the men had given up hope of saving their dinghy and were preparing to swim for the shore, about fifty yards distance. Then he called:

'Hi! You'd better come aboard. The mud's soft here.' Actually, at this spot, it was quite firm.

There was a whispered consultation, then an urgent call.

'Come and take us off, quick.'

'Sorry, can't get near you. We draw six feet. You'll have to come to us.' Then he went on to the children: 'They want to pinch our dinghy.'

'My friend can't swim,' the same man shouted, but Pete answered:

'Well, swim yourself and tow him.'

As the moon went behind a small cloud, they saw one man cast himself into the water, supporting the other. Pete guided them as he had done Pat, interspersing his calls with low-toned instructions to his crew:

'Hallo! (Michael, take over the controls.) Hallo! (Sally and Pat, go right forrard.) Hallo! (Potts, get some rope, quick.) This way! Hallo!'

A muffled shout came from the swimmers:

'We're close.'

And as the cloud passed from the moon, Pete saw the two swimming quite independently toward the

boat. Quickly one grabbed the other and trod water, groping at the edge of the boat.

The dawn was just beginning to break, and Sally, peering at Pete, could see that he held a revolver. She shivered with excitement and nudged Pat. Mr. Potts was standing behind Pete, ready with the rope.

'One at a time,' Pete said.

Mr. Potts threw over a rope, and said to the man who, supposedly, could not swim:

'Hang on!'

Pete helped the other man on board.

'Stand still. Put your hands up!'

'I say, whatever——?' the man protested.

'Hands up!' Pete ordered, and he obeyed quickly as he felt Pete's revolver in his ribs. Then Pete searched him and, sitting him down, tied his arms behind him, and his legs together, and then helped up the second man and treated him in the same way.

'Now,' he said at length, 'we can get on!'

. Rather to Michael's disappointment, Mr. Potts took over from him before he had had a chance to do anything. But he stood by and, before they arrived back, was given the controls.

They moved astern, turning into the centre of the channel, to avoid the piles under the water on which their prisoners had holed their dinghy. Then they chugged down toward the harbour.

The prisoners began to get restive.

'I say,' said one, 'what's the idea? You'll have to pay for this.'

'That's him!' said Sally triumphantly from the bows. 'That's the one who talked to us.'

She had been a little afraid that they had captured two innocent men.

'Come here, Sally,' Pete said.

Sally came and looked at the dim forms sitting in the bottom of the boat.

'Would you recognize them?'

'I can't see, but it was the same man speaking all right.'

Pete switched on his torch, and immediately Sally pointed to him on the right.

'That 's the one who came on board first.'

The two men saw that it was hopeless to try and keep up a pretence of innocence any longer, and relapsed into a sulky silence.

'They look cold,' Pat said, remembering her own teeth chattering.

Pete picked up the tarpaulin and threw it over them.

'Fraid they 'll just have to be cold for a bit,' he said.

They had now come out of the creek, and Michael took over the controls.

'Where for, Pete?' he asked.

Pete hesitated.

'Tilworth, I suppose,' he said. 'Then I 'll run you back afterwards.'

Michael headed up the main channel, while they sat watching the dawn. The sky was a delicate pale dome above them, misty round the edges, with stretches of flat cloud across, and a smooth flat floor of land and water.

'It was lucky you met Pat,' Sally said, breaking the silence.

'Mm. I 'd have been swimming still.'

Pete laughed.

'Oh, yes, well, as a matter of fact I was looking for your remains. Potts and I were over at Tilworth for the night with his brother, and I was suddenly woken up by him lumbering in and saying I was wanted on the phone. So, of course, I cursed heartily

and went to the phone. It was The Old Man. He said he 'd been uneasy about you and gone round to see if you were at home, and found your place empty.'

Here one of the men gave a slight groan of discomfort and Pete went over and eased the ropes and offered him the bottle of brandy. He took to it better than Pat had done. Then Pete came back.

'Anyway, I said: "Why the fuss?" You'd probably gone away for the night. Then The Old Man said he'd seen you go out in *Silent* and you hadn't come back. Well, at that I got a bit windy and said I'd look for you. So I dragged Potts out, and there we were.'

'Jolly lucky,' Sally said, and the others agreed.

Then they all stood up as they rounded the bend and Tilworth came into view, with the first rays of the sun catching the roofs and glinting on the water.

'Journey's end,' said Pat, and added, with a gleam of hope: 'Will we have to give evidence?'

'I don't know. Probably not—no, almost certainly not,' Pete answered, as with a boathook he drew alongside the small jetty, shouting instructions to Michael.

As they moored, they were watched by an old man in seaman's clothes who sat on a pile of wood, smoking his pipe. Pat stared at him while Pete and Mr. Potts helped the prisoners to land. They had to untie their legs, but left their hands well secured behind their backs, and while Mr. Potts helped them, Pete covered them with his revolver. Then they stood in a group and Pete frowned.

'Any of you know where the police station is?'

They shook their heads.

'He'll tell us,' Pat said, and nodded toward the old seaman. Pete looked round at him and went over.

'Good morning,' he said, and the old man, pipe in mouth, nodded slowly back, still staring. Pete went on:

'I wonder if you could tell us where the police station is?' The old man pointed up a small cobbled street leading off the jetty.

'Second road up right,' he said, and then closed his mouth firmly. Pete thanked him and came back to the others.

'O.K. Straight ahead,' he said.

The prisoners did not move, so Mr. Potts barked at them:

'Hurry up, you!' And they all moved off.

They made a bit of a clatter in the silence of the morning and, as they climbed the hill, one or two curtains of upstairs windows were drawn aside, and sleepy faces peered out at them. Pat and Sally looked up and grinned proudly, but Michael strode on, paying no attention, and the two prisoners hung their heads sulkily. As they turned up the street the old seaman had indicated, Pete turned to Michael.

'Run on and see where it is, Michael,' he said.

They watched him as he went on at a jog-trot, looking to right and left. Then suddenly they saw him stop and stand back as he looked up at something written over the door of one of the houses a few yards back from the street. Then he turned and waved. Pete lifted a hand in reply and they made their way to the spot.

'Here we are,' Michael said. 'County Police. Shall I knock?'

'Yes,' Pete answered.

But as Michael strode up to the door, one of the prisoners jerked himself free from Mr. Potts and started to run. Immediately Pete shouted:

'Stop! You're covered!'

He slowed up and hesitated. The other one called wearily:

'No good, Bill. Come back,' and Bill walked back.

However, at the noise, the top window of the house had been thrown open and a man had looked out. A gruff voice called:

'Here! What 's all this about?' and Pete said:

'Could you come down, constable? We have some business.'

As they waited, keeping a close guard on the prisoners, windows opened all round and people looked out chattering to each other excitedly. It was rather embarrassing and they were all glad when the door opened to admit them. They stood in the stuffy little passage, and the policeman, who was still sleepy, and whose clothes had been put on in a great hurry, said:

'Here—in here—in here,' and conducted them into a room to the left, meanwhile pulling his tunic straight and passing a hand through his untidy black hair. He gave them chairs to sit on, and Pete, by raising his eyebrows, signalled that he would like to speak to him privately.

'All right, sir,' the policeman said, but as Pete handed the revolver to Mr. Potts, he leaned over and took it.

'I'll have that,' he said, and then he and Pete went out of the room.

They sat and looked at each other uncomfortably. Pat felt that she must break the silence, and said in a small voice:

'I'm jolly cold.'

Sally looked round and saw the electric fire.

'Do you think I could switch it on?' she asked Mr. Potts.

'Ah, yes, I'm sure you could,' he answered.

Pat looked at the prisoners shyly and said:

'Would you like to bring your chairs nearer the fire?'

They were far wetter and colder than she was. Without a word they picked up their chairs and came over. She edged her chair a little away from them.

'You might have thanked the young lady,' Mr. Potts suggested. The prisoner Bill shrugged his shoulders, but the other one looked up and nodded at her and then looked down again.

At that moment the door opened and the police man came in. He was no longer gruff, but in a very good humour. He came across beaming, and shook Sally's hand.

'Well—well, young ladies—young sir! You've done us a service. Hrm!' He pulled himself together. 'Just a few particulars, if you'll step into the next room.'

The three got up and went out, followed by the policeman, who closed the door after them. In the next room there was a table with two chairs. The table had a large note-book on it, which the policeman had been using already.

'Now,' he began in a business-like way, 'if you'll just give me your names and address.'

He looked at Pat in an anxious way and said: 'Now, missy, there's no call to be frightened,' then he realized what was wrong and went on: 'Why! Bless me! You're cold, not frightened, of course. Bless me! I didn't see before.'

He went to the door and bawled up the stairs:

'Nance! Nance, come down a minute.'

There was a shuffle down the stairs, and the policeman leant out of the door, talking in low tones to his wife. Then they heard a kind, motherly voice saying:

'Poor kiddies! Of course I will, Tom. Just put me kettle on. Shall I bring it through?'

'Yes, soon as it 's ready,' the policeman said, and came back.

'Now, your names are——?'

'Sally, Michael, and Patricia Grange,' Michael said.

'Sally—Michael—and Patricia—Grange,' the policeman murmured as he wrote them down in his book.

'And your address?'

'Shallows, Woodgrass Lane, Shale Island.'

The policeman smiled.

'Ah, you 're the newcomers, then, at the little house out in the marshes?'

'That 's right.'

'And how long exactly have you been there?'

They all thought.

'Two weeks and five days,' Sally said, and Michael nodded his agreement.

'But we bought the land last September,' Pat said, and the policeman added a further note. Then he sat back.

'Well, I think that 's all, except to thank you very much indeed. You 've been of great service to us. If these gentlemen are who I think they may be, you will have helped to clean up one of the biggest gangs of crooks at large.'

They opened their eyes wide.

'A gang?' Pat asked excitedly.

'Oh, yes, these shows aren't worked in twos,' the policeman answered, smiling. 'Now I 'd better see them, and my wife will give you a bit of something before you go home.'

'Oh! Please! Wait a minute,' Michael said. 'I 'd forgotten——' and he kicked off his left shoe, fished down his sock, and drew out the scrubby piece of paper on which he had copied the notices they had

found in the paper on board. He handed it to the policeman, saying:

'I don't know if this is of any use,' and told him how they had got it. The policeman took it and carefully placed it in the back of his note-book.

'It's all evidence,' he said, 'or may be. Now, you cut along and I'll see the others.'

In the other room there was a tray on the table, and on it there were mugs of tea steaming, and a large loaf with butter and jam beside.

'Come along in, dearies,' Nance, the policeman's wife said, as she drew them up to the fire and settled them each with tea and a slice of bread and jam. Then she sat down herself on the settee.

'You'll excuse me appearing in company like this, I'm sure,' she said. 'You caught me unprepared.'

She wore a voluminous blue dressing-gown, and her grey hair was tightly rolled in curl-papers. Sally answered:

'Of course. You don't expect people to be up at this time in the morning, and, anyway, we aren't very tidy ourselves.'

Then Pat said:

'It's very nice of you to give us this tea.'

'Ah, well! Didn't you need it? After your adventures and all?'

This remark produced a burst of conversation. All three talked at once, and Nance was a delightful listener, nodding and smiling, and asking just the right questions. But in the middle the policeman came back with Pete and Mr. Potts. The children looked inquiringly at them, and Pat said:

'Where are they?'

'Locked up for the time being, where they'll do no harm,' the policeman answered.

'Oh!'



It was rather awful to think of them being in a cell, whatever they had done, Pat thought, but, of course, she realized that they had to be.

'Well, we'd better be getting back,' Pete said, and again the policeman thanked them all, and the children thanked his wife for the tea.

'Will we be able to hear what happens?' Michael asked.

'Certainly,' the policeman answered. 'Yes, I'll see that you hear,' and he closed the door behind them.

Then they walked down to the jetty and climbed into Pete's boat, and set off for home with *Silent* in tow.

CHAPTER 8

INSECTS AND OTHER MATTERS

ABOUT half an hour later Pete dropped them opposite their house, and they rowed ashore with borrowed oars. When they got up to the house it was not worth going to bed, so they had breakfast, and then Michael went off to the yards to see Pete.

At midday he came back, hot and hungry, and lounged on the veranda while Sally laid lunch. The interest of his morning's work had put the smugglers out of his mind, and he was meditating the ever absorbing problem of his future career.

'You know, Sally, maths are jolly useful in ship-building,' he called back as she came through the kitchen.

'I suppose they are.'

She stood in the doorway behind him, gazing across the creek. He spat out a piece of grass he had been chewing.

'I'm not sure whether to be a mathematician, after all. Something like Pete does might be right for me.'

'That's the third time you've been going to be something different since you stopped going to be a violinist.'

'No, but this is serious. And it's all in the same line. You know Pete's tank?'

'No.'

'Well, he has a small water tank and he tries out models of ships in it, and he wanted a swivel mast, but couldn't quite work out—oh, well, you wouldn't

understand, but I had an idea and he thinks I may have hit on the solution.'

'That 's an idea, not maths.'

'It 's based on maths.'

'Oh.'

And then Sally saw all her washing laid along the fence.

'I say, what 's happened to the washing?' she asked. Michael looked up.

'Oh, sorry. I took the washing line.'

'Whatever for?'

'The Old Man was up at the yards and I wanted to practise some splicing I was helping him with.'

'And I suppose you 've ruined the washing line?' Sally cast around in her mind for a damping remark, but Michael was obviously taken up with his own thoughts, and she ended ineffectively: 'Well, I wish you wouldn't be such a bore.'

'Pete said I brought us up the creek pretty well this morning,' was Michael's only answer, but Sally was clattering china in the kitchen, and calling Pat, who was fast asleep, flat out, on the balcony. However, Pat did not wake, so Michael went up to find her.

She looked up at him as he stood in the doorway.

'It 's lovely here,' she said.

'Mm. It 's lunch time.'

Pat made a movement to turn over, but stopped half-way and lay back, saying in a very matter-of-fact voice:

'Ow! I 'm stuck.'

'How d' you mean, "stuck"?' Michael was still thinking about his career.

'Stuck to the balcony.'

He giggled and stepped toward her with bare feet, but leapt back clutching a foot.

'My hat, I should say you are. It's boiling. But you'll be all right. Wait, I'll get some shoes.' He ran to the head of the stairs and called down: 'Sally! Sally, Pat's stuck to the roofing felt.'

In a pair of sandals he came back. Each time he put his foot down it squashed tiny bubbles of tar raised by the heat. Sally came to the rescue, and together they ascertained how stuck Pat really was.

'Lucky I put my scarf under my head, or you'd have to cut my hair off,' she said. 'Actually I can get up all right, it hasn't hardened. But I'll be in an awful mess.'

By this time she had levered herself up, with their help. At first she did not notice the heat underfoot, having got used to it, but after a second she hopped quickly indoors and stood there trying to see the damage over her shoulders. Her dress was splattered with tar all over, and her legs were smeared.

'Oh, dear, this is my new dress,' she said in some alarm.

'Give it me,' Sally answered, 'and come downstairs.'

She took a small bottle of olive oil and poured it into a basin, and then put in the injured parts of the dress.

'We'll leave it to soak. Michael, get the liquid paraffin—we'll have to use that for your legs.' They washed her legs with it, and then Sally went on:

'Now then, Thawpit. I hope it's all right on the skin.' She looked at the bottle but it gave no help, so she dabbed some on her hand to make sure it did not hurt.

She then took a rag and rubbed it on Pat's arms, legs, and shoulders, and in quite a short time Pat was moderately clean, though a little sore.

'We'll leave the dress and have lunch,' Sally said.

Pat was rather dismal.

'Mummy will be awfully cross if it doesn't come clean.'

'Oh, it'll come clean. I say, we haven't written to Daddy and Mummy.'

'They haven't written to us,' Michael answered, and Pat added:

'We might be dead for all they know. Who's to write, Sally?'

'Well, you like writing best,' Sally answered.

'I've just nearly been fried. And, anyway, if I wrote I'd have to say something about my dress.'

'I know,' Michael said. 'The first person to drop or spill a piece of food, writes.'

This was agreed on.

'What are we going to do this afternoon?' Sally asked after a minute's silence while they all conveyed food to their mouths with utmost care.

'I don't know. Laze?'

'Pat would suggest that. Let's go round to The Old Man. He may have forgotten he's taking us for a sail to-morrow.'

'Ool! So he is.' Pat came to life with a bounce. 'I wonder if it'll be fine? Can I have the water, Michael?'

Michael pushed the jug across, but in doing so knocked over his own glass. Water pooled across the table.

'Yippee! You write. I was sure it would be me,' Pat laughed.

Michael tried to argue that he had spilt not food but drink, but this had no effect.

'All right, I'll do it this evening. Let's go. I'm full.'

They washed up, and Sally treated Pat's dress with Thawpit and hung it to dry before washing it ordinarily.

'Looks as if it might be all right,' she said.

'Mm,' answered Pat a little dubiously. 'I'll put on my old, old green dress. It doesn't matter what happens to that.'

'Your old blue dress is old enough.'

So Pat put on last year's dress and they started off down the field.

It was low water and the creek looked sleepy. The mud and seaweed shone in the sun, and the stones underfoot were hot. In the dyke behind the sea wall, a little water was running through the dirty green reeds.

Before starting along the wall, they stood looking at the heat haze over the harbour. In the channel were tall masts and, scattered about the shores, big and little boats lolled at angles on the mud, waiting for the water to come back again and float them.

Sally climbed the first stile and dropped into the shade of the tamarisks which here grew from both sides of the path.

At this point the sea wall had crumbled, and the tamarisk had rooted itself firmly in the cracks, enlarging them as it grew, until the cement had gradually come adrift, and great lumps had rolled on to the shore. The trees from both sides met overhead. Sally shook her head.

'These beastly flies! Come on, let's get past.'

There was a continual hum as myriads of gnats and unpleasant zooming flies moved about the shady tunnel.

The children hurried through and came out by the fencing of The Old Man's garden.

'I wonder if he's having his lunch?' Sally suggested.

There was a movement below, and a voice boomed up:

'No, he's not. Hallo. Come on down.'

They jumped over the edge on to the shore, and sat down on the seat beside The Old Man's jetty which ran a few yards into the creek.

'Oo, isn't it hot?' Pat said, leaning back.

'It is,' The Old Man answered. 'It's a lovely day. But I'd like a bit more breeze for our sail to-morrow.'

'We thought you might have forgotten,' Pat said.

'Oh, no, bless my soul, I wouldn't forget you.'

'Listen to the mud,' Sally said dreamily. There was a continual sound of many thousand tiny pops and crackles.

'What is it?' Michael asked. 'I noticed it when I was working on *Silent*, but it wasn't so much as this.'

'It's the heat crackling the weed, and all the insects in the mud,' Sally told him, and The Old Man joined in:

'I've listened to that for a great part of me life. I could tell blindfold the weather and the time of the year from the sound of the mud.'

Pat looked up from where she was lying on her tummy along the seat:

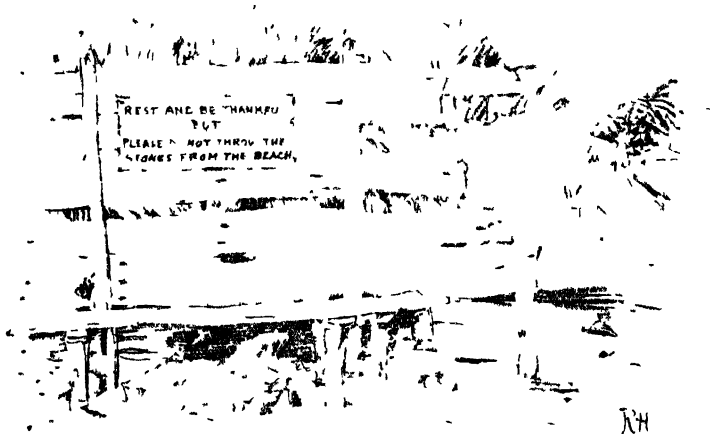
'You know, it makes me feel I wouldn't mind anything if I could live here all my life. It's always the same and always changing. I mean the harbour always is the same, but it never looks the same on two different days.'

'That's right, young lady. That's the way the Almighty made it. I have lived here most of me life, and I don't want anything else.'

Michael was sitting on a boulder a little below them. He was gazing toward the wall, shading his face with his hands and looking through his fingers. It was some time before he took in the words he was absent-mindedly reading.

'Why don't you want stones thrown from the beach?' he then asked.

The Old Man shifted himself along the bench and looked back at the notice painted on a slate and nailed on to the wall. Sally read it aloud:



and Michael remembered guiltily having a stone-throwing competition with Pat on the day of their arrival. But The Old Man was talking.

'You see, it's not like a sandy beach where the water drags the stones up with each tide, and it doesn't matter if they are thrown out to sea. But if you throw a stone off this shore, it will sink in the mud, and the water won't bring it back. Now, son,' he said, pointing to the edge of the mud, 'fetch me one of those stones near the mud.'

Michael ran down and began picking up one stone after another.

'Any one will do,' The Old Man said.

'Can't find a clean one. They've all got hanks of weed on them.'

'That's what I want.'

So Michael picked one up and took it to The Old Man.

'Now that's the only way the stones get here. A piece of seaweed attaches itself, and then when the water brings it up, it brings the stone too. Now, I suppose you can all tell me *why* we want the stones?'

Pat thought for a minute.

'It would be awfully slushy for walking, without.'

The Old Man's eyes twinkled and he smiled so that there were little fanlike creases from the outside corners of his eyes.

'Oh. You're not a lady of the sea yet. No-o, that's not the answer.'

He then looked at Sally, and she spoke a little uncertainly in case her guess too should be wrong.

'Is it because if there were no stones, the sea would undermine the sea wall and gradually flood the island?'

'That's a better answer. That's right. And that's why it makes me angry to see young rascals throwing stone after stone into the water.'

He looked first at Michael and then at Pat, and they all three laughed.

'We won't do it again,' Michael promised.

'Well done. No, of course you won't, now you know the reason. Hallo! Who's that?' The Old Man turned round, listening. 'Hop up, young lady, and see who's coming.'

Pat scrambled up and looked along the path.

'They're nearly a field away,' she said. 'Two men.'

'Oh-h? Now who would they be? Not from the yards, are they?'

'I'm not sure,' Pat said, as Sally and Michael joined her, and they all stared at the approaching strangers.

'Dogs with them?' The Old Man called up.

'No, but they've got jars and things,' Sally said.

'Ah, that will be the men from the mosquito research station. Haven't seen them lately.'

Then he slowly stood up, his plimsolled feet crunching the pebbles, and walked up the steps from the jetty. Standing on the pathway, he shaded his eyes with his hands.

'Yes, that's them. Well done.'

The two men, armed with small rods, nets, and jars, came in single file toward the little party at the head of the jetty. The first one turned round and remarked:

'The Old Man and a bunch of kids.'

'Uhu.'

They walked on in silence until they reached the group.

'Hallo, hallo. I haven't seen you about here. Where have you been?' The Old Man said.

'No-o.'

They stopped, and the first one wiped his forehead with a dirty handkerchief.

'You've got the sun for us, skipper.'

'Ah, it's a nice day. These young people and I have been sunning ourselves.' He turned and indicated the three, and they grinned and nodded at the two men, who grinned back.

'Well, we must be getting along, or the tide will be turning on us.'

'Where are you working?' Sally asked.

'Along the shore. By the new house.'

'That's ours,' Pat said, and Sally went on:

'What are you doing?'

The taller man, who had walked first and seemed to be the leader, acknowledged Pat with a smile, and turned to Sally.

'Come along and watch if you like. There won't be much to-day; in fact, there may be nothing. We're late.'

Here the other man got up from where he had been

sitting on the bank, and began to walk along the path.

'Coming, you two?' Sally asked.

'Oh, can I? Good!' Pat answered, and bounded up from the shore where she had been puddling for cockles.

But Michael saw a good opportunity for a talk with The Old Man.

'No thanks,' he said, and reseated himself on the boulder.

The men and the children walked along the bank, through the tamarisk tunnel and into the sunshine. There was already a fairly broad stream flowing along the channel as the tide came in. One of the men glanced at it and shook his head, and turning to Sally he explained:

'To get the mosquito eggs and larvae we really want the tide running out. The water in your ditch will be almost still now.'

'Oh, I see,' she said. 'Do you mean you trap them as the water trickles on to the shore?'

'That's right.'

The men jumped down on to the shore and trudged along, making for the place where the sea wall stopped and the marshland began. Here the water in the ditch trickled round the edge of the wall at low tide. When they arrived, there was still a little coming out. With a spade the second man, Joe, dug a small drain to bring the water out more quickly.

Sally watched the leader, Tom, while he prepared his gadgets. There was a small, tiny-meshed net, a rod with a little jar on the end, and several test-tubes. As Joe was not quite ready, Tom showed Sally a test-tube which they had filled from a ditch in a wood in the centre of the island. The water was

yellow, and in it was a small creature which rose and sank with spasmodic jerks.

'That's the larva of the ordinary mosquito,' he said. 'Now, if instead of going up and down in the water, it were lying flat, it might be a harmful one. But that's just the ordinary kind. Now we'll see what's here.'

He bent down and examined the water as it flowed out on to the shore.

'See those?' he asked.

Sally bent down close and saw a bunch of minute black specks floating on the water.

'Yes.'

'Let me see,' burst in Pat, leaning over and nearly pushing Sally in.

'Careful, missy,' Tom said. 'Well, those are the eggs belonging to the larva I showed you.'

'How do you tell they aren't the harmful kind?'

'Well, if they belonged to the harmful mosquito, "anapholes" we call them, they'd be floating in a pattern, star-shaped or diamond. I've seen them in beautiful patterns.'

'I see, and these are just bunched up anyhow?'

'Yes, they make a raft and then they float more easily and are less likely to drown.'

'Must they float?'

'Oh, yes. They won't hatch otherwise.'

'I see.'

Sally studied them, and, dipping her finger in, brought some out. Then she turned her attention to Joe, who had placed his jar to catch the outcoming water, and was pointing out the larvae to Pat, who was bending over eagerly and watching the wriggling movements of the larvae as they were carried downstream. Sally looked too for a moment, and then asked.

'But surely you don't catch the malarial mosquitoes here? I mean, what exactly are you looking for?'

'No, we rarely get malarial ones here. Just now and again we do. No, it's the others we study; the whole group is called "Culex." This island is a great breeding place. You may not notice it much, but it's the varieties we're after. Of course it was different twenty years ago. You couldn't have lived in your house then. The whole marsh was infested.'

'Why have they died out?'

'Well, we set up a research station and got them under control. Mind you, a malarial mosquito can't harm you unless it's infected itself, but there were plenty of the type here, so there was always a possible danger.'

Here Joe grunted and stood up.

'No, there's nothing to stay for.'

'Oh, well, dig it in.'

'How do you tell a malarial mosquito from a culex?' Pat asked.

'It's when they're at rest,' Tom answered her. 'The common mosquito takes up a hunchbacked position, but the malarial mosquito rests with its body in a straight line from the head to the tail, the tail being higher in the air than the head. Also the malarial mosquitoes have spotted wings.'

Sally noted this carefully in her mind, and then asked: 'How do you start getting rid of them?'

'It's quite simple. Pour paraffin on the surface of the water when they're breeding, then the larvae can't break the surface of the water, and are suffocated, so to speak.'

At this moment there was a scream of gulls in the distance. The four looked up.

'Ants,' said Joe, and continued to dig.

Sally and Pat looked at each other questioningly,

and then they all sat down on the bank and shore to watch the gulls as they came nearer. The two men took out their handkerchiefs and wiped their faces, while Pat returned to the stream to watch the larvae and Sally gazed at the gulls, waiting for an explanation of 'ants.'

The gulls were coming in from all sides now, some flying swiftly and determinedly low across the marshes, others coming in groups, screaming and circling as they came.

'Look up there.'

Sally looked where Tom was pointing. There was a faint smoky cloud rising from the ground at the far end of their wall.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Ants,' he answered. 'The females are flying from the nest and the gulls are coming for a meal.'

'But how on earth do they know?'

Tom slowly shook his head.

'That's something we can't tell.'

By this time the gulls were overhead and the noise of discordant shrieks was ceaseless, as they swooped and dived, picking off one after another ant and cutting short its journey. Sally stood up in her excitement.

'Oh, come on, come on. May we go and look?'

And she started off with the two men behind. When they neared the nest they saw ants streaming into the air like a jet of steam and then dispersing higher up, only for each one to be grabbed mercilessly by a gull before it could escape the wheeling, screaming multitude.

'Here it is!' Sally said, and they all bent over to watch where from a large crack in the cement the ants were pouring out. The surface of the surrounding cement was covered with male, wingless ants hurrying and bustling about. Every time a male

met a female ready for her flight, he stopped and they exchanged good-byes, brushing each other's antennae. Then there came a point when each female stopped wandering, took off, and joined the upward stream into the air.

There were thousands moving about quickly, absorbedly. The four watched them, crouching over the nest, for ten minutes. Occasionally one of them murmured, or touched an ant, moving it or putting an obstacle in its path.

And all the time the gulls kept up their feast, being



joined by others flying in from the sea and remote corners of the harbour.

Sally looked up to watch the newcomers as they took their place in the flight, and saw Michael watching from the tamarisks.

'Hallo, Michael.'

'Hallo,' he said. 'What's it all about?'

'Come and look.'

He joined the group and watched for some minutes. There were now distinctly fewer ants. One or two of the males were finding their way indoors again, and the supply of females from within was exhausted except for a few stragglers who hurried out, hastily performed their good-byes, and flew off. The efforts of the gulls became less frenzied too. Some were winging away across the harbour, and the movements of those left became lazy and unpurposeful, accompanied by routine squawks.

'Well, that seems to be the end,' said Tom, standing up. 'They always choose a good hot day for the flight, and, somehow, the gulls know. You'll see several of these in the next week or two if the weather stays, and you look out.'

Joe sniffed the air and looked round.

'Shouldn't be surprised if the weather doesn't stay by the feel of it.'

'It is heavy, isn't it?' Sally remarked.

'We must be getting back.'

The men collected their tools and climbed up on to the path.

'Well, thank you very, very much,' said Sally. 'It was awfully interesting.'

'We're always glad to show any one who likes to see.'

'The young lady might like to come and look over the research station,' Joe suggested.

'Yes, you must come and see where we work, if you're interested,' said Tom; 'but wait 'til next year. It's a bit late now to get the best from it, and then we're building a new wing and enlarging the work.'

'Oh, thanks, I really should love to,' Sally said, and they all waved good-bye as the men got over the stile and disappeared.

Michael stretched.

'Let's go up to the house.'

'Yes,' Pat answered. 'Let's race.'

There were cries of protest from Sally and Michael.

'Oh, Pat, it's too hot.'

'I jolly well couldn't.'

But she pleaded and they gave in.

'All right,' said Michael, with a sudden burst of energy. 'Pat gets a start up to the bushes, Sally starts at the poplar, and I start here, so I have to leap the ditch as well.'

Pat skipped up to where the trodden path wound through the bushes, and Sally took up her stand by a small poplar-tree near them. Michael stood on the bank and, when the other two were ready, shouted:

'One—two—three. Go!' and with a spring was on the clay bank across the ditch.

Pat was dashing through the bushes with Sally not far behind.

'Yeow!' she yelled, as her ankle caught on a rambler, and then, speeding on, she was nearly through when she suddenly checked and stumbled, but managed to control her limbs and jump clear of something lying in the path, screaming in mid air:

'Look out, Sally!'

But Sally was too close to be able to act on the warning, and as Pat swivelled round and made a desperate

effort to push her back, her foot came down on the tail of an adder lying in the path. The snake made a violent convulsive movement, there was a cry from Sally, and it rustled smoothly into the bushes.

Michael had come up just in time to see the accident. Without pausing, he pushed Sally on to the ground and knelt down beside her.

'Pat, a razor blade from Dad's store, and those mauve crystals on the bathroom shelf.'

Pat was off, racing over the field. Michael bent and began to suck Sally's bite, which already showed a swelling. After every suck he spat in the grass.

'Hurt?'

'More frightened, I think, really,' she answered.

'You 'll be all right. The Old Man told me how to deal with these.'

'Good. I say, don't swallow, will you?'

'No. Anyway, it's the poison in the blood stream that matters.'

Pat came back purple and gasping, and handed over a razor blade and tin of permanganate of potash crystals.

'I brought a bandage too,' she said.

'Well done. Now, Sally, I'm going to cut. It 'll be quick.'

And it was. Before she had time to protest, Michael had made two sharp cuts crosswise over the bite and, picking a few crystals out of the tin, he parted the flesh a little and dropped them in. Then he pressed his thumb on the spot.

'Yes, I 'll put the bandage on.'

In a few minutes he had covered it up, and they were ready to go in.

'Do you think you can walk?'

'Rather! It really doesn't hurt all that much.'

Nevertheless, Michael gave her an arm up the field, and then insisted on her sitting on the divan in the dining-room while he and Pat made tea.

As they were drinking tea, Sally on the divan, and the other two on the floor, Michael said:

'I think I'll go and get The Old Man just to look at your leg. I'm sure it's all right, but he'll be able to tell us.'

'Don't get him here. I can walk.'

'No. Pat, you stay with Sally, and I'll go. How do you feel?'

'O.K., thanks. The actual place hurts, but not badly.'

Michael went off, and about a quarter of an hour later returned with The Old Man.

'Now then, young lady, you've come to grips with an adder, I hear.'

'Yes, I'm afraid I have.'

It astonished her how gently he took off her bandage and felt all over her leg. The others watched in silence. At length he stood up.

'Well done. She'll be all right. I couldn't have done it better meself. Go to bed early and come for a sail to-morrow. We'll put your leg in the sun and you won't feel it in a day or two.'

'Thanks so much for coming round.'

'Oh, that's all right. You just want to keep an eye on the ground on these hot days, but they never hurt you if you don't hurt them.'

'She won't be ill?' Pat asked anxiously.

'Bless you, no. She won't be ill. She's healthy and had it attended to at once by the young doctor here. She won't be ill. Don't you get frightened.'

And he stumped away over the field.

'Oo, I hope we don't see any more,' Pat said.

'I don't know,' Sally answered. 'They're really

rather lovely animals. If you lift one up by the tail it's a beautiful blue underneath.'

'Why, have you done it?' Michael asked in surprise.

'No, but W. H. Hudson talks about it in his book.'

'Well, you're jolly well not going to do it, even if we do meet one again,' Michael said firmly, and to his relief Sally answered:

'I don't think I want to particularly. I'll take his word for it.'

She fumbled among the books on the shelf beside her.

'What do you want?'

'My note-book. I must enter mosquitoes, ants, and adders. I hope I can remember everything.'

Pat found her her note-book and pencil, and then she and Michael settled down to write to their parents.

'What on earth is there to say?' Michael said thoughtfully.

'Smugglers,' said Sally, without looking up.

'Oh, yes. Now, what can I say about them? Dear Dad and Mum——'

'Oh, I'll do it,' said Pat, and Michael willingly handed over the pad and pen and, while Pat wrote the letter, advised her about spelling and punctuation. She wrote four pages on both sides.

'We ought to get a good one in answer to that,' she said.

'Have you put about my bite?' Sally asked.

'Oh, no. P.S. Sally got——' But Michael stopped her.

'Look out! They might think she was dying and feel they ought to come back.'

So the P.S. ended: 'No, nothing, it doesn't matter.'

'It will be fun when they do come back,' Sally said.

'Yes, but not yet,' answered the other two together, and linked their little fingers across the table.

'Keats,' said Pat.

'Kipling,' answered Michael.

And Sally joined in with a question to make them both answer 'Yes':

'Do we need a meal?'



CHAPTER 9

SAILING

AT twenty to nine the next morning the three were down at The Old Man's jetty, by the side of which his twenty-foot dinghy *Mackerel* rocked at anchor.

It was nearly high tide and Pat sat dabbling her legs in the water which came to within a few inches of the wooden top. Sally sat on the rail surrounding the jetty. She carried a picnic basket as The Old Man was going to drop them at the other end of the island, from where they would find their own way back, as he had to make a journey a few miles along the coast and would not be back that day. She had limped a little coming down, but was all right otherwise.

'Hallo,' Michael called, and The Old Man, who had appeared at his gate, waved and smiled back. He was wearing a yachting cap to-day. He came

down the steps and walked along the jetty toward them.

'Well done. Well done,' he greeted them; 'and the young lady all right?'

'Yes, thanks, I'm fine. I was sick in the night, but that was just shock,' Sally said.

'And she had lots of breakfast to make up,' Pat reassured him.

'Well now, there's not as much wind as I'd like, but we'll make do. Got your grub?'

And he bent down and picked up a line which moored *Mackerel* to the jetty, and pulled her gently toward him.

'Pat get in first,' he said.

She climbed backwards down the first rung of the ladder, and then stepped on to the tiny decking which covered *Mackerel's* bows. Sally handed her the basket and followed her down.

'Now you'll have to go aft,' The Old Man said to Michael, 'while I set the sail, and then I want you to sit on this seat amidships.'

He climbed down himself and they were all in.

'You can put in the rudder, son, if you like. Take a look and you'll see how to do it.'

Michael picked up the rudder plate from where it rested on the floor boards, and saw that there were two iron pins at the back. These fitted into rings sticking out from the stern, so that the rudder plate could swing from side to side. Carefully he knelt on the seat and lifted it overboard. It was tricky fitting it on, especially as he could only tell by feel whether the lower pin was in its hole, as it was under water, but at length he managed to get it in.

'Shall I put in the tiller?' he asked, holding the stick which fitted into the top of the rudder, controlling its movement.

'If you like,' answered The Old Man; 'but let it swing. Don't touch it.'

By this time Sally was looking out from a mass of sail which The Old Man had loosed from the boom.

'Now, careful of your head,' he said, and began hauling on a rope. The sail slowly went up, with creaks and crackles, and the boom swung gently from side to side as the wind caught slightly in the sail.

The Old Man spent a few minutes adjusting rope so that the sail had no wrinkles, and then, leaning over the bows, he hauled up the anchor and they were ready.

He took the tiller under one arm and held the mainsheet, the rope which controlled the mainsail, in his hand. Pulling in the slack of this, he moved the tiller to starboard; the wind came and filled the canvas, tautening it, and they were off, moving slowly and silently across the water.

'Now, son, if you notice the boat heel one way or the other, you move in the opposite direction, and keep us well balanced.'

'Trimming the vessel,' said Pat at once.

'Yes, that's what it's called. So you know all about it?'

'Michael made us do it when we went out rowing.'

'And a good thing too. I thought there'd be an accident when I watched you bouncing about in that little matchbox.'

They all laughed.

'Hallo,' said Michael, 'there's another boat.'

They looked astern and saw a sailing dinghy whose mast looked far too tall for her size. She was some distance away, coming from the yards, and had an enormous mainsail, but the sail in front of the mast was absurdly small.

'That's young Pete in his perambulator.'

The Old Man always called any one less than sixty 'young.' A faint look of anxiety spread over his face, for there was a fierce, but friendly, rivalry between the two when sailing.

'Give me that line, son,' he said, and Michael handed him the thin line he had indicated. Then The Old Man took another rope, which was the jib-sheet, and, holding the two, pulled on the smaller one. There was a sharp rattle and a small sail unfurled before the mast. There was a slight, but noticeable, increase in their speed.

'Will we win?' asked Pat quickly.

'We should,' said The Old Man, 'if sailing had anything to do with it, but when he builds himself outlandish sailing coal-scuttles, we can't tell.'

He looked back. Pete was perhaps a shade nearer than he had been. The Old Man went on:

'He's got the advantage. In a light breeze he can get along quicker than us. He's got more sail.'

Michael and Pat watched anxiously as Pete approached.

'Now, when I say "lee-oh," you duck,' said The Old Man.

They waited while *Mackerel*, sailing across the channel, came nearer and nearer the shore.

'Lee-oh,' he said, and they ducked as he put the tiller behind him and took the jib-sheet from the other side of the dinghy. Sally saw that they were now facing the other way.

'That's called tacking,' The Old Man explained. 'When you're going into the wind you have to go zigzag. If you tried to go straight into it, it wouldn't fill your sail.'

The next tack was very short, and when they were in the middle of the one after, there was a hail from close behind. The Old Man acknowledged it by

lifting his hand, but did not turn, and said to the children:

'No, he 's got the better of us in this breeze.'

They watched the lighter dinghy with the large sail creeping nearer and nearer. She was a little to star-board of them, but began to change course, coming up on the port side.

'Why does he do that?' Michael asked.

'Well, you see, it 's a dirty trick to come between the boat you 're chasing and the wind; it 's called "blanketing," and it 's a bad thing to do.'

'But we 're blanketing him now,' said Sally, as Pete lost the wind and his sail began to flap. The Old Man grinned.

'Ah, that 's his problem. He took it on. No, he can't get us on this tack.'

The ripple of the oncoming dinghy's bows became less loud as she dropped astern.

'No, son. Wait your time,' chuckled The Old Man, looking back, and Pete laughed too.

'What you want,' he shouted, 'is something that will sail—move through the water.'

The Old Man snorted.

'I want something I can take out when the water 's a little more than ruffled, without having to go for a swim.'

Pete roared delightedly and continued to call The Old Man names till they were again on the long tack. He then drew closer, and, in spite of being blanketed, pulled ahead.

'Good-by-ee!' he called, as The Old Man shouted:

'Well done. You take it, son, but I 'll have you if a breeze comes up.'

By now they had rounded the bend in the creek, past the place where the children had stuck on the mud, and had to tack at less frequent intervals, as

they were going less directly into the wind. The water beat against their bows with tiny slaps.

'Now,' he said, 'I'll take you across the harbour and then back and up Turnstone Rithe, and put you off in the woods at Milady's Pool. Then I'll have to look slippy and get out before I lose the tide. That suit you?'

'Yes, thanks, that will be lovely.'

They were passing between the tin can and the basket beacons now, into the main channel and slightly rougher water. *Mackerel* rocked up and down, and The Old Man headed her half up-channel, and let out both sails to catch the wind coming from behind.

Splash slish, splash slosh, the bows came down on the little waves, sending the spray over Michael, who turned to face it.

'Sounds like crunching sugar,' he laughed back, and the other two leaned overboard to watch the water running briskly past.

The harbour was alive with boats; big boats and little boats moving slowly about. Most of the sails were white, but here and there was a brown one, or a red. In the far distance, near Tilworth, were myriads of tiny white sails gathered at one point.

'There'll be a race there,' said The Old Man. He was identifying various distant and near craft.

'There's the *Marestail II*,' he said, pointing out a shapely yacht not far down-channel. She was painted white, with a tall mast and sail. 'And there's the *Scavanger*. I haven't seen her for a long time.'

Pat looked where he was pointing.

'Do you mean that one with two masts?'

'Yes. She's a ketch.'

'What's that?'

'Well, her mizzen-mast, the one behind, is smaller than her mainmast, and the mizzen, that's the sail, is

rigged all on board. Now——' He twisted round to look about among the boats. 'Ah! You see that green boat?'

'Yes,' they all answered.

'She's a yawl, and you can tell her from a ketch because the mizzen is rigged outside her stern.'

They looked carefully, comparing the two boats.

'Oh, I see,' said Sally. 'The yawl has a sort of stick on the back, and the mizzen's tied on to it.'

'Yes, that's right.'

Michael mentally translated Sally's explanation into nautical language, and looked again, to be sure of being able to identify any yawl with which they might meet in the future.

'That's a ketch,' said Pat, pointing to a yacht coming up the channel toward them.

'Ah, no, young lady. That's a schooner. You see, she has two masts, and the forrard is shorter than the mainmast.'

'She is pretty.'

And indeed she was. Heeling slightly to starboard, with tall white sails, she cut through the water, throwing up a little on each side. Sally and Pat turned in their seats and watched as she went past. The Old Man, too, turned, and as a man on board shouted:

'Beautiful weather!'

He lifted his hand and shouted back:

'Yes. Good day.'

'Do you know him?' Pat asked.

'No, I haven't seen him before,' The Old Man answered.

They were now on the other side of the harbour. The shore was wooded almost down to the water, and ran like a straight wall up the main channel, except that near the mouth of the harbour there was

a large creek. Its mouth, however, was not obvious, as it was partially blocked by a flat island, not really more than a sandbank.

The Old Man had turned into the wind and they were rocking on the inrolling waves, about thirty yards' distance from this island's shore.

'There used to be a house there,' The Old Man remarked.

The children looked at him in surprise. Now, at only a little beyond high tide, the waves were curling and breaking lazily on the shore, almost washing the centre of the island.

'You see some piles sticking up there at the further end?'

'Yes.'

'That was the well, and the house stood back a bit. The island stretched right out here, but it wasn't an island then; it joined the mainland.'

'But didn't the water ever get in at high tide?' Pat asked.

'No. Not that I know of. Sometimes they got a bit flooded in a storm. Then the sea gradually ate up the land until one winter there was a terrible storm at high springs, and in the morning there was only the shell of the house standing.'

'Was any one drowned?' Sally asked, staring at the place in horror.

'Oh, no. The house had been empty for two or three years. They knew what was going to happen, and it wasn't worth reclaiming the land.'

They sat gazing, fascinated, at the strip of barren sand with the sun shining glassily, and the green, curling waves beating desolation on it, while *Mackerel* rolled up and down with sail flapping.

The Old Man broke the silence.

'We're drifting inshore.'

He pulled in the main and jib sheets and headed away from the island. They were sailing near the wind, dancing over the water toward the harbour mouth.

'I smell a storm,' he said, sniffing the air.

'But it's lovely,' Pat said. It seemed to all three much cleaner and fresher than the day before when it had been hot and heavy.

'Well, I don't give it more than twenty-four hours,' The Old Man answered, and they had to accept his judgment.

'There's that old chicken coop,' he added. 'We'll chase her.'

The children could not pick out Pete's dinghy from the swarm of sails in the harbour.

'There,' he said, 'with a great tall sail one side of the mast, and a dirty pocket handkerchief the other.'

'Oh, yes, I see,' said Michael, laughing at The Old Man's description of Pete's jib.

'We might get her now, there's a bit too much breeze for her. She's got no ballast. Now, son, come up beside your sister.'

He hauled in the main and jib sheets, and slightly reset the course, and the little boat collected herself and frisked over the water. It had seemed to Sally that they were making quite good way before, but now they were in a race, which made all the difference.

For some minutes they watched expectantly. Evidently Pete did not yet know that he was in a race.

'He'll know us when he turns round,' The Old Man said.

Presently Pete did turn. They could just see the glint of his tanned skin in the sun. *Seaspray*, his dinghy, sailed on, but this time they were overhauling her. Pete was getting all the speed he could from her, but still *Mackerel* crept nearer and nearer, and soon they were within shouting distance.

The children were almost breathless with excitement and The Old Man leant forward. With one hand resting on the tiller and the other holding the sheets, he instinctively responded to every slight demand of wind and water.

Pete looked over his shoulder occasionally, but most of the time watched his own sails. It was true that with the fresher wind he needed ballast. As *Mackerel's* bows came level with his stern he turned and grinned, and the children cheered. They were sailing past, and *Seaspray*, who had moved so daintily through the almost still creek, seemed a little cumbersome in this choppy water, while *Mackerel* was tough and compact.

The Old Man waited until they were well past, and then, turning with care, gave an elaborate wink. He then looked at the children and, jerking his thumb back, said:

'Butterfly!'

'Here, what 's the joke?' called Pete as he saw the laughter, but with the noise of wind and water they could not hear what he said.

'Poor Pete!' Pat said.

'Oh, bless my soul, he doesn't mind. It 's always the same game,' The Old Man answered, and he waved at Pete, who waved back, laughing, before turning up the channel for Tilwort'

'Now I 'll take you up to Milady's Pool and drop you off.'

'We have had a lovely time,' Sally said.

They were weaving their way between big and little boats at anchor in Turnstone Rithe, the creek at the head of which was Milady's Pool. Very few of these boats were without interest. Michael spent his time identifying the various types, while Sally studied the people on board, some hanging up washing, some preparing the meals, some doing odd jobs of painting or

carpentry, and others lying on deck enjoying the sun, and Pat enjoyed herself looking round.

'You know there's something about ships,' she said; 'their shiny masts and decks, and their ropes. Or perhaps it's the water and not the ships at all, but, anyway, I'd love to live on the sea.'

'No, it's the ships more than the water. It's their smell,' Michael said.

'They haven't got a smell.'

'They have. Well, their feel, if you like it better.'

As they sailed further up the creek it narrowed, and the few boats were at anchor in the centre of the channel. The Old Man exchanged greetings with every one they passed, whether he knew them or not, but the children were rather too shy to do this, so they just smiled. Then Sally noticed that whereas, lower down the creek, the seaward shore had been lined with houses, up here both shores were wooded, with irregular clay banks, grassy on top. The creek was protected from the wind, and the water was still.

As they drifted along it seemed almost too quiet to speak. Sally looked over and watched their reflection sliding along directly beneath them.

'Is this Milady's Pool?' Michael asked.

'Yes. I'll go inshore and drop you off or I'll be missing the tide out of the harbour.'

The tiller creaked and the boom swung listlessly over as they headed for the bank.

'Can you get out here?' The Old Man asked.

Michael looked over.

'I think so. Tuck up your dresses, you two, and I'll roll my shorts.'

He did so and put a leg overboard.

'Oo-er!' said Pat, looking over.

It was going to be too deep for her. The water came right up to the top of Michael's leg.



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He took the basket and waded to the shore with it, and then came and helped Sally over. They stood on the shore. The great question was, how to get Pat off. She looked despairingly overboard.

'You shouldn't be such a titch,' Michael said.

'Well, I think I'll just have to get wet,' was her solution. 'I've done it before.' And with that she slipped overboard. The water came almost up to her waist.

'Oh, it is gorgeously warm!' She stood still and played her arms over the water. 'I *must* have a bathe.'

The Old Man gave a roar of laughter as she disappeared, and then came up swimming about in the space between the boat and the shore.

'Well done,' he said, and, taking a boathook, pushed off for the mouth of the creek.

After a minute or two Pat climbed ashore and sat drying in the sun. They all watched The Old Man's back as *Mackerel* glided away, further and further, until she was a speck. Her white sail seemed very tall with its reflection pointing deep down in the water. Then she slid into the mass of boats at anchor, and was lost.

It was not until evening that the children, after spending a day in the woods and on the shore, arrived back at the house. They came along the top of the creek in the twilight, armed with rhubarb. Sally had seen a notice: 'Rhubarb for Sale.' They all liked rhubarb, and as she had thought they might not get enough for a shilling, she had asked for two shillings' worth, and now she and Michael were staggering under the load. Pat walked behind picking up the bits they dropped, and carrying the lunch-basket. She was looking out over the creek, and when they came to the tamarisks she slipped ahead and went quickly through to the other side.

'I say,' she called back. 'There's a boat had an accident.'

'Where?' snuffled Michael from under the rhubarb leaves, as he tried to get over the stile.

'Out by the oyster beds.'

Michael gave up the struggle and, throwing down his bundle, sprang over the stile and leant across Pat's shoulder, looking where she pointed.

'She's afloat,' he said.

'Yes, and moving.' Sally had also dropped her load.

A slow-moving, clumsy, white object came nearer, and they had a fuller view.

'Good gracious, it's Pete,' Michael said. 'D'you see? She's not moving sideways at all, but head on with her mast lying flat across and the sail dragging.'

'Oh, I do hope he's all right.'

'Yes, he's all right, if that's him rowing. But I wonder what's happened?'

'Well, The Old Man seemed to think she wasn't very safe, didn't he? Perhaps he was right.'

'Looks as if he was,' said Pat, and they watched *Seaspray* travelling forlornly up the creek with Pete standing, facing her bows and rowing.

'He's rowing backwards on. Why?' Pat asked.

'Well, he can't very well sit, clumbers up like that, and, anyway, it's faster.' Then he called: 'Hallo, Pete!'

Pete stopped and looked at the group for a minute before he recognized them in the dusk. He was hot and sweating, and the oars were trailing in the water.

'Hallo!' he shouted back.

'What happened?'

'My mast went over, three miles out to sea.'

'Well, come and have supper with us. There's rhubarb for pudding,' Sally invited him.

'All right. I'll put *Seaspray* to bed and be along.'

They watched him row off up the creek with slow, heavy strokes, and then Sally turned and picked up the scattered rhubarb.

'Come on,' she said, 'we must go and cook lots. I can't think what else there is.'

Pete stayed late after supper, and it was ten-thirty before they noticed that it was quite dark, and he looked at his watch.

All evening they had been sitting out on the veranda, the children chewing sweets while Pete smoked, and the time had gone fast between talking and playing the gramophone. Then they realized that it was the middle of the night and they were playing a Beethoven symphony with the doors wide open, so that probably all their neighbours were being kept awake.

'What about coming out for a sail one night?' he asked, as he stretched and got up to go.

'What—all in the dark?' Pat said excitedly, and Sally, being cautious, asked:

'Will you have the mast mended?'

Pete answered that he'd take them out in *Everwet*, a more stable dinghy than *Seaspray*.

That was to be not the following night, but the one after, at high spring tides with a nearly full moon.

Then the children went to bed. It was a hot, still night, and they left their bedroom door open to get all the air possible.

Sally heard Michael trying to coax his bedclothes into making him comfortable.

'Hot!' she remarked.

'Eh? Oh, yes. I wish my beastly sheet wouldn't crumple.'

'Take it off.'

'I think I will. Oh, I see, I was trying to make the corner into the long part.'

They lay still on their beds, and at length went to sleep after more grumbles and tossings from Michael.

The night got hotter and hotter, and the children frequently turned in their half-waking sleep, muttering and trying to get comfortable. Then, as so often happens on that kind of night, at about half-past three they fell into a deep, but not restful, sleep, and woke when it was nearly nine, feeling tired and slightly cross.

A low curtain of cloud hung over the harbour, the water moved sullenly into the creeks, and the marshes looked solid and heavy and dull, while there was not the slightest movement in the bushes or the still, dried-up grass.

After breakfast, at which Pat had said practically nothing, she went and shut herself in the studio to write a story about the deserted island.

Sally, coming into the dining-room after making her bed, said:

'Where's Pat?'

'Gone off in a mouch,' Michael answered, and stood drumming his fingers on the window pane.

'Oh, do stop that, Michael!'

'Why should I?' he said obstinately, and went on.

'You haven't made your bed.'

'All *right*! One would think we were in a beastly school, from the way you talk.'

Sally said nothing, but went out to get a basket for shopping.

'Do you think it will rain?' she called, but only got 'How should I know?' for an answer.

'Oh, you are a help!'

She seized a mackintosh off the garage door.

'Pat,' she called. 'I'm going shopping. Want to come?'

'No,' came from behind the closed studio door, and, beginning to lose her own fairly placid temper, Sally went out, slamming the door after her.

Michael stood looking out at the leaden sea, jingling a few coins in his pocket, and then went into the garage to get his mackintosh. He was practically certain it would rain and felt rather a pig about not having said so to Sally, so it was a relief to see that her mac had gone from the peg beside his.

'I'm going out,' he called up to Pat, and, echoing Sally: 'Want to come?'

Pat was getting a bit tired of only herself to talk to, and no ideas for a story coming.

'Where are you going?' she called back.

'Oh, I don't know. Are you coming or aren't you?'

'No, thanks.'

So Michael went out and across the field. It was after high tide, but *Silent*, close to the sea wall, was still afloat. He got in and pushed off.

CHAPTER 10

THUNDERSTORM

For some time after he had gone Pat lounged on her bed, chewing her pencil. At length she decided that she really did not want to write a story at all. She got up and pulled the counterpane over the unmade bed and went downstairs. But there was not even anything much in the larder.

'Wish I'd gone with Sally,' she murmured.

She started to play the gramophone, but it was not any fun listening alone; she began to read, but Edward Thompson Seton did not fit in with her mood. She then stood up and looked out of the window.

'Gosh!' she said, and ran out of the room upstairs to the balcony.

Yes, there was plenty of water for a bathe; it was only about an hour after high tide.

She slipped off her clothes, climbed into her bathing suit, and ran out of the house. With the prospect of a cool bathe, and the rest of the morning in and out of the water, she forgot the muggy weather and her bad temper. She leapt across the field and through the bushes, glancing at the ground now and again in case there were any adders about.

Then, dropping her towel on the wall, she ran across the short stretch of shore and into the delicious cool water, waded out, and when it reached her waist turned round and basked gently, moving toward the deep channel. When her feet only just touched the bottom she turned on to her front again and swam vigorously into the centre of the creek. Here she duck-dived several times, swimming lazily into the

depths and then floating to the surface again. And after splashing idly for a few moments to regain her breath, she somersaulted half a dozen times toward the opposite shore and then swam until she reached it.

This shore, unlike the other, was steeply banked. There was an almost vertical drop off the edge of the marshy heathland into deep water.

Pat heaved herself out and sat on the bank dangling her legs in the water, and only now did she realize that she had never seen the harbour like this before; it was exciting. All was dull, yet brilliant. Their house, which from her low position seemed half hidden among the brambles, looked bright yellow, though it was really only cream. The sea was a thick pale green with purple lights, and across the harbour the sands were orange. It was as if the whole world were lighted by gas, she thought; yet from where did the light come? Not from the sky, which spread above her, a heavy indigo carpet of cloud.

She suddenly felt very small. And then she started; someone had hailed her from across the creek. She looked up and saw Fred standing on the further shore. Though ordinarily she would only be able to see his shape, she could now see the details of his clothes, queerly lit as was everything else. He waved.

'Hallo, Miss Pat! There's a storm coming. You'd better get back.'

'O.K. Thanks!' she yelled, and watched him hurry off in the direction of the farm.

However, she sat on the bank a bit longer, wondering why he had sounded so excited. She did not mind if she were caught in the rain, and the water was not in the least bit rough.

Then she noticed that it had become almost unbearably oppressive, and across the hills to the north of the island there was a horizontal streak of red

gold, bordering the black cloud. Perhaps it would be better to go.

She slipped into the water and swam for home. In the middle of the creek she stopped for a rest, turning on to her back and paddling. When her eyes cleared of water she was almost frightened; she could see nothing but the sky, which seemed to lower over her, pressing her down into the water and, apart from the slight splash she made paddling, there was no other sound. The whole world was waiting for something to happen.

Hastily she turned over, and as she did so there was a momentarily brilliant glare coming from nowhere, and then, over her head, a tremendous crash.

She could not afterwards remember how she got there, but she found herself lurking on the mud floor of the creek, like a crab. She did not even know what had happened, and not until she was bursting for breath did she come up. When she broke the surface of the water she gave an involuntary gasp. She could see nothing at all; high above her head and surrounding her was a thick mist. It was the water thrown up as heavy hail poured from the sky and hit the surface of the creek.

The hail was hurting her head and she put up her hand, but quickly got it under her water again. The only sound in the world was the steady beat and hiss of hail on the water. Turning back her head she tried to see where she was above the mist. But at once, on her cheeks, in her eyes and mouth, came the stinging, slashing hail.

She thought she was going to cry, but was immediately struck by the absurdity of doing that. And then something outside herself took command.

She half turned and, like a desperate animal, streaked through the water, leaving a quickly vanishing trail

of foam behind her. On—on—on, and flash, crash, came the lightning and thunder, shaking the world.

Guided there by instinct rather than thought, she put her feet down at exactly the right place on the shore. And here she herself took over the controls again. She must leave the protecting water and make a journey overland, through the hail and thunder which frightened her, and the lightning of which she was terrified.

She drew a deep breath and dashed up the shore. For a second she looked for her towel, but it had slipped and was lying, a sodden rag, in the ditch, and she could not wait. The house was her only thought.

Bent double, she raced for the brambles, once stumbling and falling flat, then almost in the same movement picking herself up and hurtling onwards. Ahead of her a jagged line of lightning flashed across the house, and she ducked behind a bush in terror as on top of it came a deafening explosion, followed by an even more concentrated falling of hail.

She got up and fought her way through the bushes to the open field. Disregarding the path which wound along the side, she ran straight across, avoiding the small fruit plants, and jumping a banked land drain. With a terrific burst of energy she covered the last ten yards to the veranda and stood wrestling with the door. If lightning should come now it might strike her, as the door frame was made of lead. It did come, but she was all right and, wrenching the door open, she flung herself inside as the house was rocked by a burst of thunder which rolled and rumbled and hammered from one end of the harbour to the other.

She was home, out of the storm. Dripping pools to the floor and shivering violently, she stood in the practically dark room, afraid to look out, and then

when the next flash came she threw herself on the divan and buried her head in the cushions. But though she was frightened of thunder, Pat was not a coward.

'Come on,' she whispered, 'you 're all right.' And, reassured, she stood up, fetched a towel, and went upstairs for her clothes.

Each time lightning dazzled the house she could not help drawing in her breath, but when she was half dressed another consideration, far more important than her own fear, came into her mind: Sally and Michael.

She hastily pulled a jersey over her head, and ran downstairs to look out of the window and see if either of them were coming. But there was no sign, and, anyway, the hail was so thick that she could only see half-way along the lane. Without a single qualm now, she thought of going out into the storm to meet Sally. No, that would be mad; for one thing she would probably be sheltering somewhere, and for another she might come along the creek or the lane. Michael, where had he gone? 'Oh, fool!' she muttered. Why hadn't he said where he was going?

She went up on to the balcony and, standing in the hail, flinching slightly at the flashes, screwed up her eyes to look over the marts' es. As far as she could see he was not there, but if he had gone in that direction he would be lying in under a ban'-; if he had gone in any other he would easily find she'iter.

She went down to heat a kettle. They would come as soon as the storm let up, and would want something warm. She filled the electric kettle, plugged it in, and turned down the switch. Then she went to put on the light. The switch clicked down, but the light did not go on, and at that moment lightning lit up the kitchen, showing the kettle looking, somehow,

dead. She went and put her ear close to it, but there was no gentle sizzle, and dipping in her finger she felt stone-cold water. The electricity had gone.

This minor catastrophe brought something else to her mind. She tried to think back, and was almost certain that when she came up *Silent* had been missing from the shore. Supposing Michael were out in the harbour in this? She raced up the stairs and on to the balcony.

No, *Silent* was not on the shore, and, though the hail had changed to rain, and the thunder was moving away, there was a wind from the west. The water in the creek was ruffled, the tide was ebbing, and Michael was out somewhere in the harbour.

Pat forgot about Sally; she was all right. She scribbled a note and left it on the dining-room table: 'Gone to Pete, by the shore. Come at once. Pat.'

She then pulled on gum-boots and mac and ran out of the house.

Once on the path along the top of the wall, she realized that the wind was in earnest. It flapped open her mac, letting the rain flood in and drench her skirt, and streams trickled down into her boots.

She ran till she could run no more, and then walked hurriedly, glancing now and then at the water which was pouring out of the creek, driven by the wind.

Then she turned in toward the caravan and ran up the field. The door opened and Pete stepped out.

'Come on in, quick!'

He pushed her in ahead of him, and slammed the door shut.

'Oh, thanks,' she gasped, and then: 'Sally!'

'You all right, Pat?'

'Yes, thanks. I'm so glad you're here. Listen, Michael's out in *Silent*.'

'Sure?' Pete demanded.

'Well, almost. He went out of the house, and *Silent*'s not there.'

They both looked at Pete, waiting for him to say something.

'Oh, Pete, what shall we do?' Sally burst in.

Pete thought for a moment, looking through the window, down which the rain was streaming. Then he turned round.

'I'm going to look for him. You two stay here.'

'No!'

Their reply was so abrupt and unexpected that he smiled and said weakly:

'All right,' though he was doubtful of the safety of going out in this weather. 'Get your clothes on.'

While they got into their already wet and clammy macs, Pete put on thigh boots and oilskins, and then they went out.

Sally noticed that he had stuffed a large jersey under his mac, and had taken a flask, which she supposed had brandy in it, from the cupboard. She did not tell Pat, but it looked as if he thought Michael might have come to grief.

Pete strode over to the yards with the other two behind, leaning into the wind and rain which were directly in their faces, though the rain seemed less heavy than earlier.

They were soon out in the middle of the creek, on the wooden pier. In the last berth was the motor boat in which they had chased the smugglers. Pete was just about to step aboard when he turned.

'Get in, you two,' he said, and went back.

They got in and crouched back for cover. Pete fetched a dinghy with an outboard motor and rowed it out to the larger boat, where they took it in tow.

In a few minutes more they were out on the creek. The engine seemed almost useless, as they swept along

with the wind and tide. The speed was frightening. In less than a minute they had travelled from the top of the creek down to their own shore, had rounded the corner, and were broadside on to the wind.

They looked anxiously ahead over the seething water, but there was no sign of Michael.

Pete was absorbed in keeping the plunging, jostled little boat on her course, and the other two did not speak. Then, with his eyes fixed ahead, screwed against wind and rain, and his hands on the small wheel, he shouted: 'We may lose the dinghy. Take this, Sally'—one hand groped in his pocket, and he drew out a heavy knife—'and if she fills cut her adrift.'

Sally leant over the stern, ready with the knife the second it should be needed. Pete still gazed ahead. They were shipping water now as the wind hurled the small waves against them. The dinghy was pulled and torn after them. Pete looked up at the sky at the heavy clouds racing low and flat over the harbour, and Pat, glancing at him, realized that he was wishing he had not brought Sally and her.

They swept past the oyster beds, miraculously avoiding all of the tall stakes which marked them out. They rounded the Dobbin, where on their trip in *Silent* they had stuck, shipping a wave as they went. Sally leant over in case she should sink, but she was still afloat.

The wind was behind them again and they shot down-channel. Still there was nothing to be seen of Michael. Reaching under the decking, Pete drew out some binoculars.

'Can you use these?'

Pat frowned.

'Give them here.'

She held them up, but only saw a blur.

'They adjust by the middle screws!' Pete shouted

as they rolled another ten yards on a long wave, speeding toward the mouth of the creek.

She turned the screws backwards and forwards, and by luck the whole low grey harbour suddenly righted itself and appeared clearly before her eyes. Only now did she realize that it was no longer raining.

Looking as far to the left as she could, she examined the two-mile-distant shore of the harbour, and the intervening water. It was a few minutes before she became accustomed to keeping the glasses on any particular spot, as they moved up and down and from side to side.

She took them down for a second to rest, but suddenly something in the middle of the harbour caught her attention. There was a suspiciously large lump on the stake that marked a county boundary. She looked through the glasses, and then dropped them, facing round with a cry of terror. Pete and Sally looked where she pointed.

'He's on that stake. Oh, Pete! Quick!'

'Cut adrift,' Pete ordered.

Sally bent over and hacked at the rope. It parted, the dinghy kicked up in the air, gurgled, and sank under the weight of the outboard motor.

After that they moved even more swiftly, as the dinghy had been a certain drag, half full of water as she was.

Sally seized the glasses which, luckily, had fallen on a tarpaulin.

'I think he's facing this way!' she shouted.

With his foot Pete dragged a small towel out of the small cupboard below the controls:

'Wave it!'

Sally tied it roughly to a boathook, and hoisted it on high, but there were no means of telling whether or not Michael could see it. Never had Sally and



Pat known such horror as this; watching Michael clinging to a post, in the middle of a rough sea. How long had he been there? One slip and he would not have a chance in this water.

Out between the basket and the tin can, into the steep water they tossed and plunged. Wave after wave mounted the gunwale, hurled across the deck, and sluiced into the sea again. Only the space aft, where they were standing, was not decked, so they were in no danger of filling. Up—down—back they jerked and lunged.

Sally, quite green, leant over to leeward and was sick, but none of them took much notice.

They were moving crabwise across the channel. Pete headed them nearly directly up-channel, the tide swept them down, and the wind swept them across. The motion was about as unpleasant as it could be, but by degrees they were nearing the post. They could see Michael clearly, and he had seen them, but could not wave as he was hanging on to a crossbar with all his strength.

Pete kicked a rope toward Sally.

'Make it fast,' he said, but then saw that she was almost too sick to keep upright.

Pat was sick too, but had not yet reached Sally's stage, and with desperate determination she took hold of the end of the rope, and after three false starts achieved a clove hitch round an iron pin on the deck.

Pete shouted out his instructions.

'I'll go alongside to loo'ard. Stand by to help him on board as we go past.'

They were about twenty yards up-channel of the post and moving rapidly toward it. Michael was trying to turn round so that he would be able to jump easily, but there was not much he could do until the moment came. It would have been easier if Pete

could have come on the other side, but then the wind would have thrown the boat against the post, perhaps holing her.

The engine was switched off; nearer they drifted and nearer, Pete anxiously manœuvring for the best position, and Michael watching for the right moment to jump.

'Now!' Pete yelled, and, swivelling in mid air, Michael jumped as a wave half lifted the boat out of the water and carried her far past the post.

Pete saw what was going to happen and shouted to Sally: 'The rope!' as he got the engine going.

Sally scrambled for the rope, and then stood frantically trying to spot Michael in the churned-up water. There he was, coming toward them. She hurled the rope, but the wind carried it far away to starboard.

Pete, who had followed every move, hauled the boat round like a horse checked in full gallop, and they lay broadside on to the channel, plunging dangerously, as Michael drifted nearer. Pete began, cautiously, to head them up-channel again. He planned to get above Michael, and then come down-channel and pick him up as they went past. But it had to be done quickly as Michael was probably nearly exhausted.

Sally watched as they bore down on him; he was on his back, waiting for the rope which she trailed in the water. For a second she thought they were going to run him down, they went so close to him. Then they were past. She could see his body as a wave washed him, and could not tell whether he had the rope or not. Then, as the boat swept on, the rope tautened.

'He's got it!' she called out, holding with all her strength.

'Hold this and don't let it move,' Pete hastily instructed Pat, and gave her the wheel.

It was hard work, in that wind, holding the course, but she managed not to let the boat swing round, perhaps tearing the rope from Michael's grasp. Then, as she struggled, she heard and felt behind her Michael being hauled on board by Pete, though she did not dare to look round at once.

'Good work,' Pete said, as he relieved her. 'Go and help Sally.'

Michael was in a heap in the bottom of the boat when Pat turned round, but was recovering rapidly. Pete glanced round once, realized that Sally and Pat were managing, and forgot them.

Watching the seething foam at the mouth of the harbour, he thought the breakers were unpleasantly close. If they got even to the fringe of that angry mass of water, they would be sucked in, and nothing could save them. He looked both ways and decided they were nearer their own creek than the other side of the harbour, and determinedly faced toward it. The tide was running out swiftly, but unless anything unforeseen happened, he thought they would fetch up anyway on the shore, if not at the mouth of their own creek.

He looked at Michael and saw, to his relief, that he was alive and kicking. He was energetically rubbing his legs with a towel and was, in fact, in a far happier state than Sally who was being sick feebly overboard, and Pat who was sitting greenly on the floor. They had managed to rally themselves for the emergency, but were now completely finished.

Then, as suddenly as the wind had risen, it died down. The waves at first grew no smaller, but gradually the foam disappeared from their tips and the boat was able to make much better way. Pete could direct her as he wished, and was making steadily for the creek.

When he reached it there was only a small stream coming out with just enough water to float them.

'That our creek?' Michael asked in astonishment.

'It is.'

Pete looked round at Sally and Pat bunched up with closed eyes, and laughed. 'Worse off than you!'

'Yes. They're extinguished. I say, I'm awfully sorry to cause all this. Is there anything we can do for them?'

'No, they'll be all right. What happened to you?'

As he talked, Pete was guiding them through the narrow water. It was a bit tricky, as too far to port or starboard would put them on the mud.

'I saw a storm coming,' Michael answered, 'after the thunder, and realized I couldn't make the creek. The sea was glassy and I moored quite comfortably to the post. Then the sea got going and I bounced about. I bailed like mad, but she filled in the end and I was left clinging. It seemed hours, but it probably wasn't more than about ten minutes.'

'Yes, I saw the dinghy. Lucky you moored her. We'll collect her when the weather clears up. That's another dinghy lost on your behalf.' Pete pointed to a dinghy lying some way up on the mud. 'We started off with her, but cast her off as she was too much trouble. I say, you're a bit cold.'

'Oh, it's nothing much,' Michael said, shivering.

'Have a hot bath when you get in.'

Pat, whose mind was quite active, though mostly employed in wishing for death, moaned:

'The electric's gone west.'

And Sally answered in the same tone:

'I'll light the boiler.'

They sounded so dismal that Michael laughed and Pete grinned as he manœuvred them, creepingly, round the Dobbin.

'We 'll have to get off at the oyster beds. We can just make them.'

And Sally and Pat thought with dim misery of having to get out and walk.

'You 'll feel better on land,' Pete told them.

The boat nosed by inches toward the oyster beds. Then Pete switched off just before there was a gentle thud as they stuck.

'We can get out here. Come on, you two, we 're moving.'

Sally looked overboard and then said weakly:

'Come on, Pat.'

Pete gave them a hand over, and helped them up the mud to the shore.

'Feel any better?'

'My legs are all soggy,' Pat said, and that was Sally's chief complaint too.

The house looked miles away, a tiny speck at the far end of the island. But they struggled on, and began to feel better as they went, until Sally was walking along quite happily.

'D' you mind if I go on?' Michael asked.

'No. You 'd better run. It 'll warm you up,' Pete answered, and they watched him as he went off along the shore.

'Do you think the bad weather 's over, Pete?' Sally asked.

'I don't know. It might be and it might not. It 's difficult to tell on this island.'

'Well, if it is,' she went on, 'you 're taking us out to-morrow night.'

Pete stopped and stared at her.

'Good heavens! D' you mean you want——? Well!'

Sally, whose mind was working a little slowly, looked at him, wondering why he seemed surprised.

'We promise we won't be sick again,' Pat said pleadingly. 'Do take us.'

'Well, if you really feel like it after to-day, of course you can come. I only thought it might have put you off sailing,' he answered as he helped them over the sea wall.

'Being sick ordinarily doesn't put you off eating,' Pat said, and Pete could think of no answer. It certainly did not in her case.

'All right,' he said. 'The only thing is, it's possible Michael won't want to come. After all, he had a fairly near escape from drowning.'

'Ye-es, I suppose so. But I think he will want to come,' Sally answered, and then called to Michael who had appeared on the balcony, towelling his head.

'Hallo!' he shouted back. 'You're right. The electric has gone. We'll have to light the dining-room fire. I say, Pete, you're taking us out to-morrow night. What time shall we be round?'

Pete looked at Sally and Pat, who were laughing.

'About nine-thirty to ten,' he answered.

CHAPTER II

CALL FROM THE CONSTABLE

WHEN they got in the house was dreary and cold, and they could not switch on a light or boil a kettle. However, after several false starts Sally got the boiler alight, so that an hour later Michael was in a hot bath. Then terrific rattles and bubblings began in the loft where the tank was and the radiators.

'I say,' called Michael from the bath, 'what's that?'

'The water's boiling!' Sally shouted back. 'We'd better have baths too and run some off,' and then remarked to Pat: 'We might as well, we haven't had one since they went away.'

But they could not cook on the boiler, so they lit the dining-room fire, and soon an enormous log fire was blazing with a kettle perched at a dangerous angle in the midst, spitting out water into the flames.

Though it was only five by the time they were sitting round the fire, there were heavy clouds low over the harbour, and it was so dark that the fire lit up the room, and shadows danced on the book-case nearby and on their faces.

'Let's make it a winter evening and draw the curtains,' Pat suggested, peering out of the window.

Then she jerked open the door eagerly, saying over her shoulder to the others:

'It's our policeman from Tilworth.'

They jumped up and came to see.

'Come in, do,' Sally said.

He leant his bicycle against the wall and shook hands all round, then stepped into the firelit room, taking

off his hat. He looked very smart now, in his uniform, with his hair not at all ruffled.

'Well, I expect you all know what I've come about?'

'The smugglers?' they asked, and Michael said:

'Do they want our evidence?'

The policeman shook his head.

'Well, no, as a matter of fact they have all the evidence they need, but I've come to deliver a letter to you.'

'Come and sit down first,' Sally said. 'We're just making tea, and you look a bit wet.'

'We-el, I'd like it if you're sure you are. Shall I take off my mac?'

'Yes, we'll hang it in the porch.'

Sally took it from him and Pat drew up a chair for him.

'The only trouble is rescuing the kettle from the flames,' said Michael, who was hovering over the fire with a poker and a dish-cloth.

But at length the tea was made, and they were all sitting round the fire. The policeman felt in his pocket and drew out an official-looking envelope with 'O.H.M.S.' on it. It was addressed to the children.

'There you are,' said the policeman, handing it to Sally. She quickly tore open the envelope and unfolded the stiff sheet of paper inside. Then she read out loud:

'To the Misses Sally and Patricia Grange, and Michael Grange, Esquire.

'DEAR MR. AND MISSES GRANGE,

'I have heard the story of how you helped to capture the two men who brought the ship *Louisiana* into Echester harbour, bearing goods of a contraband nature, and wish to express my gratitude to you.

'We were finding it difficult to trace these men, as they had abandoned their ship, and but for your courage and prompt action, I doubt whether we should have done so at all.

'I believe that it was partly owing to these men that you lost the oars for your own boat, and I shall be so glad if you will accept the gift of a new pair of oars. I have arranged that these shall be delivered to you as soon as possible.

'With many thanks, again, for your service to His Majesty's Government,

'Yours truly,

'A. J. WHITEHOUSE.

'Chief Constable, County Constabulary,
Echeater.'

'Oh, isn't he ripping!' Michael said at the end. 'I say! New oars. I thought we 'd have to save our pocket-money for weeks.' And Pat broke in:

'What a letter! What will Mum and Dad think? Oh, His Majesty's Government, just think of it!'

But the policeman was drawing something else from his pocket, and they crowded round when he said:

'And here 's another thing that might interest you.'

It was a daily newspaper, and they guessed what was inside, as he slowly unfolded it, and pointed to a column headed:

CHILDREN CAPTURE NOTORIOUS SMUGGLERS

and then a sub-heading:

GIRL SWIMS FOR HELP

'You know, we didn't exactly capture them ourselves,' Michael said, and then, reading down the

column, he saw that Pete and Mr. Potts were given quite a good report.

'I hope they don't mind us having all the headlines, though,' Sally said, but the policeman assured her:

'I don't expect they will. After all, they gave the story to the paper.'

'I say,' Michael asked, 'I suppose we couldn't keep this paper, could we? I mean we've never been in the paper before, except for a notice each when we were born.'

The policeman laughed.

'Why, of course you could. That's what I brought it round for. Here you are, take it.'

Michael put it over on the sideboard with the letter and Sally poured out another cup of tea all round.

'Well, I really should be getting back,' the policeman said, but he held out his cup all the same.

Sally wanted to ask what had happened to the smugglers, but was shy of doing so. After all, they had enjoyed themselves immensely, but these two men, who looked quite ordinary, were shut up in prison. But Pat saved her the trouble of asking.

'Where are they now?' she asked.

'They're waiting to go to the assizes,' the policeman said.

'In prison still?' Michael asked.

'Yes,' he answered. 'You see, they called a special court yesterday—they don't usually have court on Saturday—but this was too important to wait over the week-end.'

'Was there a judge?' Pat asked.

'No,' he said. 'Just three magistrates, they're the county J.P.s, you know, and they took evidence of arrest. It's too serious to be dealt with here, so they'll go to the assizes next week.'

'Will there be a judge then?'

'Oh, yes, at the assizes there 'll be a judge and jury, and they 'll be properly tried.'

'And what sort of punishment will they get?' Michael wanted to know.

The policeman thought.

'It's hard to say. It depends on the findings. There are other men mixed up in the business, and we don't know if these are the ringleaders or not. They 'll hardly get the same, because probably one is not so involved as the other.'

'I suppose that 's what they find out at the assizes?' Sally said, and he answered:

'That 's right. One of them might get two or three years, and the other less, according to what he 's done. Well, we know one of them, he 's an old customer, been on trial before. But the other 's a newcomer.'

'Oo! Which one 's been on trial before?' Pat asked.

'The tall one, handsome like,' he answered.

'Oh, yes, that 's the one that wasn't Bill. Will he get hard labour as well?'

The policeman laughed.

'Hard labour don't amount to much more than sleeping without a mattress nowadays,' he said 'He might get it.'

'And what about the snip?' Michael asked.

'Ah, the ship,' the policeman answered. 'She 's believed to be a ship registered by the name of *Lucretia*, stolen off the Yorkshire coast last July, and never traced. The owners are coming down to take a look at her.'

'How exciting,' Sally said, 'to think your ship 's been used for smuggling, and now you 've got her back!'

'Well, I must be getting back too,' the policeman

said, 'or they 'll be having me in court for neglect of duty and going out to tea,' and he stood up.

'Thank you very much for bringing the letter round instead of sending it by post,' Sally said.

She fetched his mac and he struggled into it, and then they saw him off at the door.

'Good-bye!' they called, and, waving back at them, he shouted:

'Good-bye, and good luck!' and bicycled off into the rain.



CHAPTER 12

SAILING AT NIGHT

THE next morning brought a postcard from their parents saying that they would be back on the following Thursday.

'Good! That's three days,' said Sally, when Michael read it out. 'I think we ought to do a really good clean-up, so that the house will be nice when they come.'

'All right, I'll scrub the stairs,' Michael said, tying a tea-cloth round his waist. 'Come on, Sall, where's the bucket and soap?' The Granges had not yet managed to buy a stair carpet, so during the preceding fortnight the stairs had become more and more filthy. They kept a bucket of water outside the door to take off the worst of the mud from their legs, but there always remained quite a lot to be left somewhere in the house. They had been meaning to clean the stairs every day, and now Michael attacked them with great energy, while the girls turned out the dining-room.

At the same time as cleaning the house, they watched the weather anxiously. The thunder had not entirely cleared the air, but it looked as though it would be fine enough for a sail, and when the evening came the sky cleared and there was a small breeze.

'We'd better put on warm clothes,' Michael said. 'It gets pretty cold at night.'

So they put on two vests and heavy sweaters, and took their mackintoshes, and at about nine-fifteen set off for the yards.

It was quite light, as there was a moon, and the stars were showing too.

Pat looked at the water filling the creek.

'Oh, it will be fun! I wonder where we'll go,' she said, skipping along the path excitedly.

They were over the last stile, and could hear movements across the field which suggested that Pete was making ready. At that moment he hailed them, and they hurried along toward him.

'Hop in,' he said, as they came on to the fore-shore where *Everwet* was moored in the shadow of a large two-masted schooner silhouetted against the moon. 'All three of you? Good.'

They piled into the little boat and arranged themselves, leaving room for Pete.

Once they were out in the creek, the breeze carried them along quickly, and they were soon gliding between the long dark poles, reflected faintly in the water, which marked out the oyster beds.

'Hallo!' said Michael in surprise. 'What are you doing?'

They were past the oyster beds, and Pete was heading them into one of the lanes of water which wound through the marshes at half tide.

'You'll see,' Pete answered him, as *Everwet* drifted along.

'I feel rather like Alice through the looking-glass, taking the sheep for a row,' Pat said.

'Yes, you always feel that happened in a kind of dream light.'

Sally and Pat were talking almost in whispers, and Pete and Michael were silent, as they glided along like a ghost.

Then Pete got up and came forward to the mast, and *Everwet* rocked violently. They saw him fiddle with some ropes, and then there was a sharp rattle

as the sail came down. Michael pushed it into the centre of the boat, round the boom, and Pete sat down on the tiny decking in the bows, which was just large enough to hold him. Michael was in the stern, with Sally and Pat one on each side.

Sally sat with her feet up on the seat, and her arms clasped round her knees. She looked round at their silhouetted forms, and then overboard at their reflection dimly wavering. A few yards away she could see a dark, irregular line where the water met the marsh.

Suddenly there was a flutter and a squawk close by, followed by a distant mournful cry. Then a dark shape disentangled itself from the marsh grass and glided noiselessly, close over them. They could feel the disturbance of air just above their heads, then the bird was gone and they heard it settling down on the other side of the water. Almost immediately another bird swooped close over them in pursuit of the first. There was a fluttering and a shuffling and an angry shriek, and then they settled until there was silence. Again came that lonely cry from far away.

'Curlew,' said Pete, and the word dropped into the stillness like a stone into smooth water.

But this last cry had brought an answer, and then a group of birds nearer started to quarrel in dying staccato squeaks.

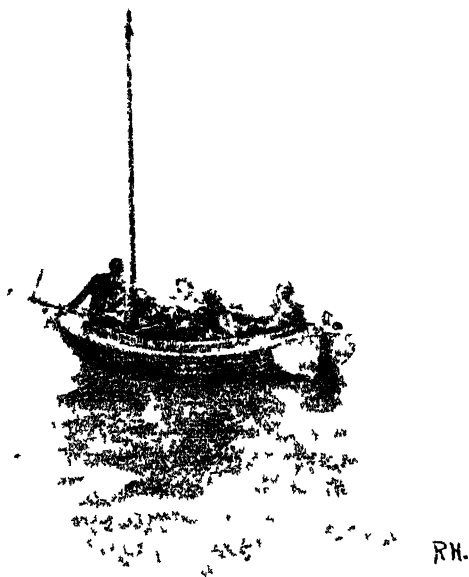
'Redshanks?' Salled asked.

'Mhm,' Pete nodded.

'Look at the lights!' Pat breathed.

Far, far away, on the horizon, they were surrounded by a circle of lights. They came from the hamlets and cottages round the harbour, and among them were the red and green riding lights of ships sailing and at anchor.

Then the silence was broken by the 'pop—pop—pop' of a tiny outboard motor. It fizzled and died.



'How far away is that?' Pat asked.

'T'other side. There, look.'

A spark of light flared across the harbour. The people were evidently examining their motor, because in a few seconds they again heard:

'Pop—pop-pop,' irregular and uncertain. And in the following silence they heard voices clearly.

'Sounds travel enormous distances over water on this sort of night,' Pete said, and then: 'We're drifting in a bit. There's an oar by you, Michael.'

Michael reached for the oar and punted them into the channel again. The water had risen considerably and had nearly covered the marshes.

'Shall we move on?' Pete asked.

'O.K.,' they answered slowly.

He climbed into the middle of the boat and, taking the oars, rowed them out toward the creek. The only sound was the creak of the rowlocks and slight splash of the oars as they broke the water.

Then, in the creek, he set sail and they slipped silently along toward the harbour.

'Listen,' said Pat.

They heard the sound of several pairs of oars, and talking and laughter, astern, and then a just distinguishable long low boat passed them. They watched and listened, unnoticed.

'Fishermen,' Pete said quietly, and the boat passed on.

'Will they be out all night?' Sally asked.

'Yes, and come in on the next tide.'

They were out in the harbour now and, looking back, Pat saw a flickering, dancing trail behind them.

'Here, I say, what 's that?' she said.

They all looked.

'Phosphorescence,' Pete said. 'You often get it in the summer.'

They dipped their hands in, and watched the glow-worm light on the water.

'Where would you like to go?' Pete asked, and they all looked round.

'Well, where are we now?' Michael said.

To them it just looked as if they were in the middle of an enormous stretch of water surrounded by tiny lights.

'Toward the mouth of the harbour,' Pete told them.

'Well, couldn't we go in and out of the boats?'

'Yes, do let 's,' Pat added.

So Pete brought them round to catch the breeze, which would take them to the harbour mouth where the bigger boats were anchored.

They heard a boat rippling toward them, but could only see its phosphorescent trail.

'Good night,' Pete called, and there was an answering:

'Hollo! Good night.'

When they came to the mouth, they had to thread their way amongst the boats, guided by the riding lights.

There was a slight swell here, and as they moved slowly up and down they had an occasional glimpse of a deck with the cabin light shining out, and once they saw a man searching for something on deck with a torch.

Then to starboard loomed a great shape, and Sally gasped:

'Oo, Pete!'

He quickly headed them to port and there was a slight rasp as they grazed along the side of a motor launch, just avoiding a proper collision.

'Near miss!' he chuckled, and then: 'Ssh!'

A man had leapt from the cabin, shouting:

'Here! What do you think you're doing?'

He sounded angry, but they had slipped off into the night. He flashed a torch across the water but did not see them, and then, muttering, he went below again.

'We'd better turn back, or we'll be out to sea. Lee—oh!' Pete said, and the children ducked as he went about.

For some minutes they wound back through the boats and then, quite suddenly it seemed, they were far away from them, alone again.

'Hallo, it's pretty starry,' said Pat, looking up.

'So it is. Oh, look! There's a shooting star.'

They all looked up.

'Another,' Pete said.

'Where?' asked Sally, and turned quickly.

'It's gone now,' he answered, and she said sadly:

'I'm always looking somewhere else when it happens.'

'Well, put your head back and keep your eyes wide open.'

She did this for some minutes but got tired, and just as she looked down again Michael said quickly:

'There's one.'

'Oo, you liar. I bet there wasn't.'

'There was!' he answered indignantly. 'At least, I thought there was.'

'Here, stop fighting, you two,' Pete interrupted. 'What can you hear?'

'A roaring,' Sally said.

'I say, Pete, is it that little deserted island?'

'Yes. What do you say to landing? The water isn't breaking very hard.'

Pat let out a squeak of joy.

'Oh, Pete, can we really?'

'Yes, if you haven't bounced us all into the sea before we have time to get there.'

Pat sat down again, and stayed very quiet as they neared the island. Though the water was not running at all fast, there was a definite moment when they felt themselves caught in the ingoing waves and being carried purposefully toward the shore.

It was a breath-taking moment. They could see nothing; they could only hear the small waves breaking, and feel the boat sweeping along. They all wanted to hold on to each other, but none of them liked to do it, and held on to the gunwale grimly instead.

'Get ready!' Pete called.

He had taken down the sail and was holding the tiller, keeping them head-on to the beach.

Sally watched a white-tipped breaker coming up behind. The moon was out, and they could see quite

clearly how it rilled on and caught them up. Then they felt themselves lifted and apparently held in the air, before there was a quick sweep on, and with a bang and a jar they were down on the beach.

They scrambled out, Pete coming last.

'Here, take this,' he said, and handed Michael a bucket from the bows.

'What is it?' asked the others, crowding round.

'Bring it up and see.'

He had moored *Everwet* to one of the posts The Old Man had shown them, which marked where the well had been.

Then they sat down nearby in the shelter of a small bank.

'Now!' said Pete, and dived into the bucket, bringing out firewood, some paper, matches, and sausages.

They soon had a fire kindled; the wood snapped and crackled and the little flames reached up, illuminating their hands and faces as they bent over, laughing, with their sausages on the ends of sticks.

'Hi, what shall I do? Mine's burnt,' said Pat, as the skin slowly rolled back off her sausage. Sally moved her stick across to balance Pat's, and in doing so dropped her sausage into the fire.

'Misery!' she shouted, and Pete plunged his hand into the fire and rescued it.

'Let's eat,' said Michael. He had been quietly and systematically getting his cooked in a private spot at the edge of the fire.

'Yes, let's,' said Pat, holding her hot brown remnants of sausage in a handkerchief.

There was silence, punctuated by squawks and groans as they burnt their mouths.

'That was jolly good,' said Michael. 'What did make you think of it, Pete?'

'I ate sausages in the night like this once before, and have always longed to do it again.'

'Yes, and to do it on a deserted island is best of all,' said Michael, and then added: 'I say, how do we get off? I mean the wind and the waves won't turn round and take us.'

'Pete, can we stay here for the night? Oh, do let 's,' pleaded Pat.

'Well, you can if you like, and I'll fetch you tomorrow. I'm going now. Come on, whoever's coming, or there'll be no water.'

They poured a bucket of water over the fire and then went down to *Everwet*.

'We'll have to tow her round to the other side of the island. As Michael says, we're on a lee shore here, with wind and water against us.'

So they hauled *Everwet* round a few yards to where she was sheltered from the wind, and they could set sail and come round into the wind, giving a wide berth to the breakers on the shore.

'I think the tide's on the turn, and helping us. It must be about eleven-fifteen,' Pete said.

They sailed on for some time before he spoke again.

'Now keep your eyes skinned and see if you can spot the basket or tin can.'

They all peered into the dark, and then Sally said:

'You know, if I lived here long enough, I think I'd come to live entirely by the wind and tide and not by the clock at all.'

'Yes, that does happen. Some visitors never seem to grasp it,' Pete answered. 'I wonder where that beacon is. We ought to have come to it.'

'Well, we've come to something,' Michael said, as with a slur and a sludge they nosed on to a mudbank.

'Well, I'm blowed! We can't be where I thought we were,' Pete said in an injured voice, and Pat cried:

'We're lost! We're lost! Oh, what fun!'

There was nothing to tell them where they were, and they sat while Pete pondered.

'Let's have a boathook,' he said, and Sally scabbled on the floor until she felt it, and passed it up. Pete plunged it overboard.

'Oh! Sand!' he said. 'We must be back near the island. Listen a minute.'

They listened and could hear the murmur of running water.

'Mm, we are, unless that's the bar. I wonder how that happened.'

He pushed off and they sailed for about five minutes, but then again they stuck.

'Again. We really are lost,' Pat said triumphantly.

'Yes, I think we are,' Pete answered. 'Good gracious, it's mud this time. Well, where are we?'

'I don't know,' they all three said.

'It'd be some help if we knew which side of the harbour we were.'

'Well, we've just crossed the harbour, so we must be our side,' Michael said.

'Yes, but there's no sand our side, so we must be the other side,' was Pete's contribution.

'Well, let's go on and see where we get to,' Sally suggested, and as it seemed to be the only thing to do, they did it.

'Here, Michael, take the pole, and see how the depth goes.'

Michael put the boathook overboard every few seconds.

'Getting deeper,' he said, and then: 'Deeper—deeper. Oh! Completely deep, I can't reach the bottom.'

'Well, go on for a moment. We may be crossing

a small channel. It's unbelievable how many mud-banks there are when it's dark.'

But after a few minutes Michael again reported a good depth.

'All right, draw in,' Pete told him, and added: 'I'm afraid the wind's dropping. We'll have to row if we don't get a bit more way on than this.'

'Are we moving?' Sally asked.

'Yes, a bit. Not much. Put your hand in and you'll see.'

'I say, surely that's a beacon,' Michael said, and put out his hand. 'Yes!'

'Cling on,' Pete ordered, and clambered forward to feel it.

'It's steel—we are on the other side. Must be about half-way down the channel.'

'Listen,' Michael said.

'Pop—pop—pop.' It was quite close.

'The motor boat!'

'Matches. Did we bring them off the island?'

'Here they are,' said Michael.

'Good, I'll cup my hands. Now—strike.'

A tiny match flame flared in the dark, lighting up Pete's hands and their two faces bent over. After a few seconds it went out. They tried again, and then a third time. The other boat was quite close. Pete bellowed at it.

There were two men aboard.

'Someone signalling us,' said the first.

'Switch off, then we'll hear.' The first man switched off.

'Hallo, therel' he called. 'Hallo!'

'Can you tell us where we are?' Pete called, and Pat added:

'We're lost!'

'You're north of the sand island, fairly close inshore,' came the answer. 'Tide's half ebb.'

'Thanks a lot!' Pete shouted.

'That's all right. Good night.'

'Good night!' they all shouted back, and the motor started off again up the channel.

'Not much tide left,' Pete said. 'We'll probably have to row.'

'You'd better head her up-channel, hadn't you? Or we'll land up half-way out of the harbour,' Michael said.

'Yes, you're right there. Well, we'll see what we can collect in the way of wind.'

'How can you be sure you're steering straight?' Sally asked a bit anxiously.

'Well, what breeze there is is tickling my right ear,' Pete answered her, 'and as long as it doesn't begin tickling my nose or my neck we're all right.'

'Unless the breeze changes direction,' Pat said.

'Unless it does. We'll have to trust to luck over that.'

They sailed on for a few minutes. Occasionally the sail flapped a little despairingly, trying to catch the wind, and then it seemed that they were quite still, rocking gently.

'We're not moving now, are we?' ventured Pat.

'Yes, astern,' said Pete, and they laughed. 'I think we're about where we began.'

There was a sudden scrape and grate. Pete stood up and held off the obstruction.

'This is the beacon we've just left. There must be a current taking us inshore. Hang on, Michael, and I'll lower the sail. We'll have to row.'

So, when the sail was lowered, they started off again, Pete rowing with long strokes, and the children crouching against the gunwale as they moved com-

paratively swiftly through the water. Then, as a cloud passed from the moon, the harbour slowly lighted up.

'More mud than water,' Pete remarked. 'We'll be lucky if we get to the oyster beds. However, I don't fancy a night sitting on the Dobbin,' and he began to pull harder.

'Well, we can see where we're going, that's one thing,' Sally said.

'Yes, 'til it clouds over again.'

But the clouds were moving slowly, and they were nearly at the mouth of the creek before it once more became dark.

'Will we get up the creek?' Pat asked, and Pete answered:

'I think so. It's only a question of rounding the Dobbin.'

And a few minutes later the moon showed them, for a few seconds, the great round hump of mud, and the stream trickling round it.

'Get out, every one, we'll have to push.'

The children quickly pulled off their shoes and socks and clambered over into the shallow water. *Everwet* had grounded, but they managed to push her along, half afloat, half skidding on the mud. It was difficult getting her round the corner, but Pete went to her bows and hauled her along like an unwilling donkey, while the children pushed behind. They heaved her, grunting and groaning, into the deeper stream, then, as she floated, she suddenly shot forward, and Pat was left on her knees in the water.

'Owl! I've had a bath.'

The others stood in the dark and laughed.

'Never mind,' said Pete. 'We're nearly back.'

They all climbed in again, but the channel was too narrow for rowing.

'Here, Michael, get an oar and we'll punt,' Pete said, taking the boathook.

So he and Michael stood one each side, and pushed her along the channel between the banks of mud, until they reached the oyster beds.

'I'll come and fetch her next tide,' Pete said, as he anchored her in the mud.

Then they stepped out and walked, slipping and sliding up the mud to the shore

'Hallo, it's beginning to rain,' Sally said.

'Yes, and they're big drops. We'd better hurry or we'll get wet. I don't like this weather, it's too changeable.'

They walked on as fast as they could in the dark, but the rain was coming down quite heavily before they reached the sea wall, and the children turned off.

'It's been lovely. Thanks so much,' they said.

'Thank you,' Pete answered. 'I'll make a dash for it now. Cheerio.'

'Cheerio!' they shouted and, jumping over the wall, they hurried up to the house, as a small wind rustled the poplar leaves, and the rain began to beat in real earnest on the bushes.

CHAPTER 13

SPRING TIDE

ONCE or twice Pat woke in the night and heard weird cries and whistles as the wind drove round and over the house, and once a gull shrieked as it circled overhead. Then she turned and pulled the sheets closer, listened for a moment to the rain beating on the skylight, and fell asleep once more.

Sally was the first to get up. Her balcony door was held open by a catch to the balcony rail, against which it was now rattling and slapping.

She hopped out of bed and, seizing the top blanket, folded it round her like a cloak and went out on to the balcony. As she stepped out she was beaten sideways on to the door, and then the wind bundled in under her blanket, bellied it out, and tore it from her so that it streamed away, entangling itself in the balcony rail, while she held on to a corner and pulled, and the wind sucked and streamed through her pyjamas, and her hair flooded in a mass over her face. At last she tugged the blanket free and retired to the doorway.

There was not much water in the creek yet, and it was not raining, but a dark grey broken blanket of cloud moved swiftly over the harbour from the south-west. A small thorn-tree, the last outpost of cultivation, was bent before the wind, while between the house and the creek the brambles and grass were driven relentlessly, laid almost flat against the ground. The birds crouched low for cover too, only the hardiest venturing into the air, to be tossed away and thrown down, exhausted, on to the marshes. To the



Ry

right of the house, where trees bordered the track and fields, the wind soughed and rattled as it swept through the leaves.

Sally looked out cautiously to see what was banging so loudly, but quickly came in again. The sound was coming from up the creek at the yards. One of the large sheets of corrugated iron from the shed Pete was building must have torn loose, and was now banging against the framework.

For some moments she stood looking out to sea

where the greyness of sky and water met, broken by a white line of breakers over the bar.

Then she realized that the telephone was ringing, had, in fact, been ringing for some time. She dashed downstairs into the dining-room and picked up the receiver.

'Hallo. Sally Grange speaking. Hallo!'

Nothing happened and she put down the receiver as Michael came into the room, yawning and stretching.

'It's only the trees bouncing on the wires, making it ring,' he said.

And the bell went on:

'Tring—tring, tring—t-ring—tring,' as the wind bowed the twigs along the lane, sending them dancing on to the wires.

'Isn't the wind terrific?' Sally said.

'Yes. It's the beginning of the equinoctial gales. Look at those boats.'

'Which ones?'

Michael pointed out to the mouth of the harbour at the mass of tiny masts. Even from this distance, by watching carefully, they could see them leaning first this way and that in the heavy sea, sometimes coming almost level with the water.

'Are they safe?' Sally asked.

'Don't know. Some of them may drag their anchors. I don't suppose any one's aboard.'

And then he stopped in thought, and went on:

'I say, I hope *Silent*'s all right.'

Pete had salvaged *Silent* from the post in the middle of the harbour at low tide the day before, while on the way back from a business journey along the coast.

'Why shouldn't she be?'

'Well, there's a colossal wind. It might take her into next week. Anyway, I'm going to see.'

And he unlocked the veranda door. But Sally stopped him.

'You must put something on.'

'Um. I suppose so.'

He went into the garage for a mackintosh and boots, and then the back door slammed behind him, and Sally saw him running down the field.

The wind, sweeping across the harbour, was gathering strength. It rattled all the windows, and the house shook under its fury.

Pat appeared sleepily in the kitchen, where Sally was getting breakfast.

'I say, it's blowing.'

'Yes. Breakfast's nearly ready.'

Pat went off to get dressed, but first she went, as Sally had done, to have a look over the balcony. It thrilled her, this low flat world of mud and marsh with a ceiling of grey cloud, all objects hugging the ground or being swept helter-skelter into the air and away.

Then she saw someone on the sea wall. She frowned and looked harder. Yes, it was Michael—in pyjamas! Waving a mackintosh!

'Hi, Sally!' she yelled, and dived downstairs.

'Michael's standing on the wall waving, in pyjamas.'

'Gosh! *Silent!*' was Sally's answer, and having switched off the kettle, she pushed Pat out of the way and rushed to the back door.

But Pat was not to be left out. She seized a jersey of Michael's lying on the floor, and shuffled into her sandals, hastily doing up the buckles. There seemed to be nothing to put on her bottom half. Never mind—pyjamas were quite warm—and out she ran too.

She gasped at the fury of the wind which slashed the grass, and then the brambles, against her. With

a bound she was on the sea wall as Michael and Sally began to race off down the shore.

'Wait!' she screamed.

The cry came to them hard and clear, and they turned. She jumped on to the shore and dashed over the stones, driven by the wind, her hair streaming ahead.

When she reached them, they had to shout to make themselves heard.

'*Silent* has torn her moorings! I think that's her on the marshes!' Michael yelled as they went along.

Then they saw Mr. Potts coming toward them with a cowl, bent double as he fought his way along. They had now passed the thorn-tree and were out in the full blast of the wind, panting for breath.

'Your little boat?' Mr. Potts said, in answer to their inquiry. 'She's out on the marshes, blown like a match-box. There's a gale coming.'

They thanked him and rushed on, stumbling and staggering in the whistling, blinding wind. And he went on his way grinning to himself at the oddly dressed three. Sally had put on a skirt before cooking breakfast, but still had on pyjamas underneath.

Then Michael called a halt, and they stood still, scanning the marshes in the direction Mr. Potts had indicated. Pat huddled her arms into her jersey and wondered what had made her think pyjamas were warm.

Then a brown speck moved slowly in the distance.

'There she is!' Michael shouted, and they were off, struggling, battling their way along, and plunging through empty basins of mud not yet filled by the tide.

After some minutes they arrived as *Silent*, caught by the wind, performed a cartwheel in the air, coming down and digging her bows firmly in the mud.

They stopped, worn out, their breath coming in



rasps, and turned their backs to the wind. Sally sat down, but got up again.

'Wet!' she explained bitterly.

'We've got to get her back!' Michael shouted. 'The tide will be all over here!'

He had been examining *Silent*, and had found to his surprise that she was undamaged.

The others did not take the news badly; it had to be. But Pat, thinking of the journey out, quailed at the thought of going back, dragging *Silent* and facing into the wind.

It was like a nightmare. They turned her right way up. Then Sally and Michael took turns in pulling her by the painter at her bows, and the one not pulling helped Pat to push at the stern.

She kicked and jerked along—bumped—jolted, bumped again. Down into a hollow with Pat on her front, up again, a sudden dart forward, Michael slipping and coming down in the mud, then on, on, on. And all the time the wind was searing, blasting past, cutting their limbs, whistling and shrieking in their ears, and making their hands red and sore and cold.

They none of them dared look up. It would be too depressing; there were miles and miles of marsh to be covered. They just struggled on, Sally and Pat with their soaked shoes chafing their feet, splashing through the coarse grass and weed which cut their ankles.

From experience they learnt that it was better to go round the mud basins than through them, though it made a winding, intricate route.

But at last Pat, head bent against the wind, recognized, in passing, a mud pool; it was one quite close to the shore. She looked up. Yes, they had only a few yards to go.

The only comfort in exchanging the shore for the

marsh, however, was that it was the last lap. The added discomforts were the harder texture of the ground, and the rattle and roar of the wood grazing the stones. However, Michael thought, if it didn't hurt her being hurled over here by the wind, it won't hurt her being dragged back by us.

At last, now struggling for breath and to keep going at all, they arrived at the sea wall. They lay down on the stones and felt the wind sweeping over them. Then Michael raised his head and looked at the water foaming angrily up the creek.

'We must get her over the wall. There's going to be a high tide,' he said.

Again they made no remonstrance, but got up tiredly and helped him to heave, coax, and push the unwilling dinghy up the wall. They were too worn out to prevent her when she slipped from their grip and crashed down into the ditch the other side.

It was a little sheltered here, and they soon dragged her out and up to the poplar-tree, where Michael moored her.

They looked at her, lying quietly in the field at last, and then went up thankfully to the house.

Sally slammed the door shut on the raging gale and flung herself down on the divan in the dining-room. There was a long silence and then she said:

'We've done all that on no breakfast.'

They usually drank tea for breakfast, but Sally decided that this was an occasion for coffee. They had it, hot and steaming, with eggs and bacon, round the fire.

The rain had now come and it was like a dark afternoon. It had grown gradually darker, the house rattled and banged unceasingly, and the rain streamed down the windows and beat on the walls.

'This is good,' Michael said, crouching by the fire,

his hands round a mug of coffee. 'I feel like an exhausted traveller in the Arctic who's been picked up and is being revived. By the way, what's the time?'

Sally jumped up to go and look at the kitchen clock.

'Ten-fifteen,' she said as she came back.

'Tide 'll be up in another hour or two. There 'll be some fun then.'

'Michael! Pat!'

There was a queer half-anxious note in Sally's voice and the other two looked round. She was standing by the veranda door, peering out through the rain which battered against the glass.

'What?'

'I don't know, but I think—I think the tide is up in the bushes.'

'What!'

Michael and Pat leapt up and came to the window. They could not see properly, but it certainly looked as if the water was abnormally high.

'Come on. We 'll go and have a look,' said Michael, and they hastily climbed into macs and boots.

'Can't open the beastly door,' Sally said, pushing and straining against the veranda door.

Then suddenly it flew open, hurling itself backwards, and the tempest poured into the house. Rain flooded on to the mat, 'the fire blew out a cloud of smoke, a newspaper rose and took flight, and with a smash three plates on the dresser fell to the floor, and a picture hanging against the wall broke its glass.

'Quick! Out!'

The three struggled out and, getting behind the door, forced it forward until it slammed, breaking a pane.

Holding hands, they went down the field, and as they came to the bushes, there was the tide trickling up. There was no sign of the sea wall, and from as

far as they could see the water raced toward them, a sheet of grey with hurrying foam. The marshes and fields around were covered, and *Silent* floated twenty-five yards away from them, jogging up and down, but firmly attached to the poplar.

And every minute, with laps and spurts, the tide was coming further in. As they stood there they were drenched, not only by the rain, but by the spray which the wind carried full into their faces and away over their heads.

For some minutes they were held by the wild splendour of the storm, but then Michael yelled:

'We must get back. The tide's got an hour and a half to go. It'll be in the house.'

The others nodded and, turning, they were swept back up the field with the wind and rain at their backs.

Just as they were battling their way round to the back door they met The Old Man. He raised a hand in greeting and followed them through into the house. They stood, a dripping group, in the hallway.

'You'll have to move your furniture,' he told them. 'It's the worst tide since I was a boy. Now, let me see——' He went into the dining-room. 'You'll want that carpet up, and the chairs upstairs. Let me see——' He laid a hand on the dresser. 'No, you'll have to leave that. Now have you got a tarpaulin or some old oilskins? Hallo! What's this?'

A dribble of water had come round the dining-room door. They followed it back and found water splashing down the stairs.

'Just hop up and see what it is,' The Old Man said to Pat. 'Now, lay your oilskins along the cracks under your doors, and weight them down.'

'It's the skylight!' Pat shouted. 'It's torn off, and the studio is in an awful mess!'

Sally raced up with a bucket and placed it under

the gaping hole in the roof through which wind and rain and spray were pouring. The room had been completely disorganized; everything that was not wedged to the wall or floor had scattered and was blowing about.

'It must have happened when we were out. Oo! Come on!'

The girls ran out, slamming the door. The Old Man was in the hall.

'Well, I'll leave you now and see to me own house. You'll be all right. It won't get upstairs if it does come in.'

'Thanks awfully for coming round,' Sally said.

'That's all right. Well done,' he answered. The door blew shut after him, and he plodded away down the lane, through the torrent.

For the next half-hour they were busy stopping up gaps in the doorways and moving the light furniture upstairs. They rolled up the carpets and stuck mackintosh sheeting over the gap in the veranda door where the pane had blown out.

'Much good we did cleaning the house!' Michael remarked grimly, and Sally nodded with a grin.

Every few minutes someone ventured into the studio, which was a battle-ground of the elements, to put a fresh bucket under the skylight.

At last they had finished the more urgent jobs, and could turn their attention to restoring order there. The first thing, obviously, was to stop up the skylight.

'What shall we use?' Sally shouted.

They were standing in the passage outside, as it was easier to talk there than inside.

'Well, you two get the step-ladder,' Michael answered. 'I'll have a look round.'

They went off to the garage, and Michael went into the studio. He looked first at the ping-pong table;

it had a section that would easily cover the skylight if nailed on, but would the ceiling stand the weight? No, it was made of tentest and already the area was sodden and softened. Well, a mackintosh then, but how could it be supported? The force of the wind would tear it from the nails.

While he was thinking, he changed the buckets. And then he had an idea. But first he went and helped the others, who were staggering up the stairs with the step-ladder.

'I say, Sall, are there any really old cushions?'

'There are those three mothy ones Mum told us to burn, and we forgot,' she said, after thinking.

'Fine. Get them and the ground-sheet. I'll get nails.'

His idea was to stuff the hole with cushions and then nail the ground-sheet under, to support them; thus the cushions would absorb the rain, and there would be no undue strain on the ground-sheet.

But it was easier said than done. It was easy enough to nail the ground-sheet along one side of the skylight, except that it tossed and blew in his face, and was heavy to support. But then the cushions slipped, the sheet tore away, and the wind came buffeting him with redoubled vigour, angry at his attempts to stop its passage.

'I'll bring up the table and help,' said Sally.

Between the two of them they managed to get the ground-sheet up, so that there was a basin of ground-sheeting under the gap, filled with cushions. It was not neat, and still wind and water leaked through, but no more than through the other cracks in the house.

Pat had gone downstairs, and they stood looking at her soaked bed, the dripping book-case, and the floor with untidy puddles where they had sloshed through.

'Oi! Oil Come down, quick!' Pat yelled, and the two hurtled downstairs.

It would take more than oilskins to stop the force of water at the veranda door. Outside it was lapping eagerly two feet above the doorstep, racing toward it from far over the field. Only here and there a desolate shrub or tree poked through the surface, braving the weather.

Swish, rattle, splash!

Pat jumped.

'Must have been a tile,' said Michael, as he watched a saucer floating merrily about on the floor.

They were standing on the table. The water trickled along the bare boards, curving round the table and dresser legs.

'I say,' Pat said, 'what 's that roaring?'

'Which roaring?'

There were so many roarings that it was difficult to distinguish any particular one.

'Ow!' Michael said suddenly, and looked up.

'I say, it 's coming through the ceiling.'

A patch of damp was spreading slowly, and the first drop had hit Michael's head.

They jumped off the table, splashed across the floor, and headed for the stairs. At first they could not see where the water was coming in, but then Sally opened the door of a little roof cupboard in Michael's room. Immediately the wind burst through.

'There 's a hole in the roof. It 's the roaring Pat heard.'

Michael seized the nearest rug and came to the rescue, flattening it against the inside of the roof.

'Nails,' he said, and Sally fetched them from the studio.

'If you build a house,' he told her, as he battened

the rug to the rafters, 'have the roof lined and this won't happen. Owl'

'If *you* build a house, don't try and stand up where there isn't room,' Sally answered, as they came out, Michael nursing the back of his head.

'Here, we ought to mop this up, or the ceiling will fall in. Where's Pat? Hi, Pat!'

'Yes?'

'Bring a cloth.'

'I say, Michael, I suppose it's safe to stay here?' Sally asked.

'Oh, yes. The tide ought to turn soon. What's the time?'

'Twenty-five past twelve. It should have turned, then. Let's go out and watch.'

They forced open the balcony door and stood on the balcony, buffeted by the wind. The rain had stopped, but they were soon soaked by the spray which was falling on the roof and being blown over the house.

'Isn't it marvellous?' Pat yelled. 'Like being on the Atlantic!'

'Do you think it will be like this to-night?'

'Wha-at?' Michael shouted.

'To-night!'

'Yes, if the wind is still up!'

'It's going back!' Pat shouted at them, leaning over the balcony rail.

They lingered out in the wind for some minutes. It might be only twice in a lifetime that the water would come so high. Where it was shallow they could see the field beneath, and the flower-bed they had carefully dug and planted.

But at length Sally made a move for the door.

'I wish Dad and Mum could have seen it!' she shouted.

Once inside, they found it difficult to tone down

their voices. Outside it had been hard to make themselves heard against the wind.

'All right! I'm not deaf!' Michael protested at the top of his voice when Sally had bawled at him:

'What about lunch?'

When the tide started to ebb it went down very quickly, leaving a sheet of desolation behind it. The field was grey and sodden, and sprinkled with seaweed and scraps of wreckage.

As the children looked out from the studio window they saw the edges of the harbour littered with ships, some quite large, and lying about were huge beams and logs of driftwood.

'We'll collect that stuff for firewood,' Michael said.

And in the afternoon they went out into the field to do this. It took them some time to get used to the spongy, dead feel under their feet. When they had finished the afternoon's work, there was a pile in the garage which included an old lobster-pot, large and small pieces of driftwood, half a shirt, a bicycle wheel, odd lengths of rope, and numerous bottles.

They rested, looking at their salvage, and listening to the wind.

'Hadn't we better fortify ourselves against to-night's tide?' Sally questioned.

'Well, we can't do much more than we've done, and, anyway, it's not likely to come quite so high again. Where's the tide-table?'

Sally fetched it and they all looked over.

'Where are we?' Michael murmured. 'Here—14th September—tide's at twelve-thirty to-night, with a supposed drop of five inches.'

'Hm! An inch here or there doesn't make much difference with this wind,' Pat said.

'No, but I doubt if the wind will keep up its

strength. However, we won't move the furniture back, and we might as well leave the doors blocked up.'

'I vote we go and see how The Old Man did,' Pat said.

'Yes, let 's. He won't have got it as badly as we did, though. He 's five feet higher than us.'

'Yes, but nearer the sea,' Sally said, and ran to put the tide-table back on the dresser.

Then they started off. In their wanderings for salvage they had found so much in the surrounding fields and the bushes that they had not got as far as the sea wall. Now they walked through the bushes and then stood staring.

Where the wall had been there was a broken line of crumbling cement, with a forlorn stake jutting out of the rubble here and there.

'I—I didn't think that would happen,' Michael said feebly, after a long pause.

But the wind carried his words away and the others did not hear. They were all struggling to realize that the wall really had gone; it seemed unbelievable. It had been such a solid and permanent feature in the landscape of the creek.

They stood gazing at the battered ruin and, as if to mock their disbelief, an old and rusty tin can danced along, clattering as it fell from stone to stone.

Michael turned round.

'Well, come on.'

They squelched past *Silent*, left face down, but intact, by the retreating tide, and so great was their preoccupation with the disaster of the wall that they forgot to right her.

They walked along the bank, slipping and sliding in the mud, and looking at the litter of wreckage on the shore.

'I say, surely that 's *Carefree* from the yards,' said Michael. 'She looks pretty bust up.'

He was looking at a large motor launch end up in the mud.

And then, as they came through the tamarisks, Sally shouted back:

'Oh, what a shame! The Old Man 's pier is broken!'

But almost before the words were out of her mouth, she realized why it was broken. His sailing dinghy was lying in the mud half filled with water. Near her an oar lay sticking up at an angle, and in her bows was a large hole round which the wood was splintered and torn. She looked desolate.

'I wonder if he knows,' Pat said.

'You bet he does,' Michael answered. 'We 'll go and see him.'

They knocked at his door, and while they were waiting, Sally said miserably:

'I wish we could do something.'

'I don't think he 's in,' Michael said at length.

The cottage looked peculiarly deserted. It was more sheltered here than outside, but the water had been all up the garden, and left the garden and flowerbeds wrecked and tangled. It had lapped at the cottage, and there was a dirty rim about a foot up the wall.

Sally pushed the door open and peered round, then called:

'I say, are you in?'

There was no answer.

'I hope he 's all right,' Pat said nervously, and they went in but could not find him.

'I know. Of course, he 'll be at the yards,' Michael suddenly said.

They were tremendously relieved at the suggestion and trooped out again.

They ran along the bank and from far off could see the frantic activity going on at the yards. Shouts and clanks and the noise of the winch were borne along to them by the wind, and they could see men running about from one shed to another.

Then, as they came nearer, they distinguished a well-known figure standing on a pile of gravel, directing two men below. He was silhouetted, in his breeches and white shirt, against a dark creosoted shed; there could be no mistake.

'There he is!' Pat said in triumph, and they dashed ahead to join in the work.

CHAPTER 14

AFTER THE TIDE

THREE hours later Pete and the children sprawled, worn out, in the caravan, drinking mugs of hot tea.

'What a day!' Pete said, and there were grunts of assent from them.

'I thought the whole shed was coming down that time,' Michael said, after a pause.

'It jolly nearly did. But The Old Man doesn't miss much. He saw the danger in time.'

'Do you think Mr. Jones is badly hurt?' Sally asked.

'I don't know. He may be away some time. A crushed hand is a nasty thing.'

'What happened?' Michael asked.

He had been helping up at the shed when Pete had told the others about the accident.

'It was *Carefree*—the motor yacht in the outside berth—she began kicking and tore loose. Jones was out in a dinghy securing her, but a wave took her up and got his hand betw^{en} her and the jetty with an almighty thump. Then she crashed back and there was no holding her, in fact Jones was lucky to get clear at all. I should say she landed up somewhere by your place. I'll fetch her up to-morrow.'

'Yes,' said Michael, 'we saw her. She's tipped up on her bows. She looked rather battered, but I didn't see any structural damage. By the way, did you know The Old Man has lost his dinghy?'

'No!'

'Mm. Apparently she did more or less what

Carefree did. It looks as if a wave brought her bows down on the pier and she holed.'

'Oh, I'm sorry about that. He didn't tell me.'

'Will he be awfully cut up?' Sally asked.

'Well, yes. He's had her twenty years or so.' Then after a pause he went on: 'Oh, I don't know, he was talking of getting something new for next year.'

'But still, it's rather beastly to lose her that way,' Pat said.

They were silent for a few moments, drinking tea. Then Pete banged his mug down on the table.

'There'll be plenty of work round here for the next three weeks, or rather months.'



'Oh, it *is* miserable,' Pat wailed. 'This time next week we'll be back at school.'

'Yes, I wish you weren't going. I'll need all the help I can get. I've got six ships coming in for repair already, and I heard the telephone go several other times, but I couldn't attend to it.'

'Oo! I forgot,' said Pat, coming out of a dream. 'I attended to it once. There's a ship coming up here on the first tide they can make it. I think they said she was a Bristol cutter or something. Anyway, you're to go over to Gunter's Shore and see what you think, to-morrow——'

'Here, steady on. I can't possibly,' Pete cut in.

'Oh. Well, anyway, that's what they said. She got caught on the bar and swept up the channel on to Gunter's Shore.'

'What name?'

'Er—Bolton, no, Burlton—anyway, I wrote it down by the telephone.'

'Oh, well,' Pete laughed. 'Thanks for telling me. It's always useful to know what you're going to do.'

'I'm dreadfully sorry, Pete, but I couldn't say "No." They sounded in such a flap. Where is Gunter's Shore?'

Pete looked at her in a surprised way and then laughed.

'Do you know, I find it almost impossible to believe you three have been here less than a month? Next summer we'll explore the harbour thoroughly, W.W.P. Gunter's Shore is up Swale Rithe. It would have been a lee shore last night.'

'What's W.W.P.?' Pat asked.

'Wind and Weather Permitting. Most things done at sea depend on the wind and the weather; more so in the old days of sail, of course, but the phrase

has remained. I say, I ought to ring up those people. Did they leave a number?’

‘Yes, it’s on the pad,’ she told him.

‘I might as well do it now. At least, what’s the time? It must be pretty late.’

‘Good heavens!’ Sally said, looking at her watch. ‘It’s ten to ten. We ought to be getting home.’

Pat was sitting on the draining board with her knees drawn up.

‘I say, do you notice anything?’ she said.

‘Gosh, yes. The wind has gone.’

Michael leapt up and opened the window. The moon was shining and the yards looked an untidy, ghostly tangle of wreckage. Actually the sheds, the ships, and everything in the yards had been securely battened to withstand another high tide, should it have come. But now the wind had gone down there was no danger of a more than normally high spring tide. He turned round and said:

‘I shall live for next summer.’

‘You’ll be back at Christmas, won’t you?’ Pete asked.

‘I don’t know. Will we, Sally?’

‘I don’t know. Oh, we must!’

‘Yes, we simply *must*.’

Pat sounded so solemn and final that they all laughed.

‘I’ll tell your parents I can’t get on without you,’ Pete said.

Sally got up from her cramped position and stretched.

‘Well, we’d better go now. Come on, every one.’

‘I’ll see you again before you go?’ Pete asked.

‘Rather! You haven’t met Dad and Mum yet.’

‘Good. Well, good night. Can you see your way?’

'Yes, thanks. Good night.'

'Good night.'

They went out and walked toward the bank. It was getting on for high tide, and the moon shone on the incoming water. But it was to be a very different high tide from that in the morning.

As they came near The Old Man's jetty, they heard voices.

'The Old Man's sitting on his bench. I wonder who he's talking to,' Pat said in a low tone, and at that moment a voice called up from the shore:

'Hallo.'

'Hallo,' they said, jumping down. 'Oh, hallo, Fred.'

'Good evening. The Old Man's been telling me you had to get your furniture up.'

'Yes,' Pat said, 'but it was great fun.'

'I say, we're awfully sorry about your dinghy,' Michael said.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' The Old Man answered. 'She's been a good little boat, but I'm not sorry to be getting a new one. She was old, and I was never quite happy taking people out if the weather wasn't fair. But I'm sorry about her.'

'Did you see it happen?' Pat asked, and Michael kicked her, but The Old Man did not seem to mind.

'Yes. From me top window. I saw the wave coming and I knew I'd left too much slack to her mooring and she'd be thrown up. I knew it, and then she was, and it broke her.'

They were silent, not knowing what to say, and then Michael said:

'How did you get on, Fred?'

'We lost a chicken. Otherwise no damage. Of course, we're sheltered from the worst of it, and it was an early harvest, so we haven't suffered the loss of it.'

'Good. It must be awful to lose a harvest.'

'It is.'

'When I was a boy,' The Old Man said, 'it was at high springs one year, and me father lost a hundred acre of his crops. They said it was a judgment on us for using machinery, but the Almighty doesn't work with the farmers like that, nor with the navy.'

'Was your father a farmer?' Sally asked.

'He was. He owned most of the land round the harbour. Young Fred would have been working for him in those days.'

'I would have been working out in the sea, part time, wouldn't I?' Fred said.

'Yes, a part of the land is covered by water now. But where the sea takes a bit, it gives a bit, and there's plenty of land round the harbour that wasn't here a hundred years ago.'

'Has the island altered shape, then?' Sally asked.

'Well,' The Old Man answered, 'it wouldn't show on a map, but the people who live their lives here notice the difference from year to year, and the sea will be taking Pat with it in a few minutes if she isn't careful, as well as the land.'

Pat jumped up with a laugh from where she had been squatting. The water had crept to within a few inches of her.

'Oughtn't we to be going, Michael?' she asked. 'It must be about half-past ten.'

'I suppose we ought,' he answered regretfully.

'I'll come with you as far as your place,' Fred said, and the four of them got up on to the path.

'I'll see you before you go?' The Old Man asked, as Pete had done.

'Oh, yes. Dad and Mum come to-morrow. We'll bring them round.'

'Good. Yes. Well done,' he answered. 'Good night.'

'Good night,' they said, and left him sitting on the bench.

'When do you go back?' Fred asked.

'The day after to-morrow,' Sally said. 'It will be lonely for you without any difficulties to help us out of.'

'It will,' he laughed, 'but I 'll save myself for when you 're next down.'

They were by the house now, and they stood on the veranda looking at the moon shining on the sodden ground; then Fred yawned.

'I must be going to find my bed,' he said, 'and I expect you must too. I 'll see you around before you go.'

'Good night, then,' they said, and Fred went round the house, but a minute later he called them, and they ran round to the front door.

'It looks as if your oars have come,' he said, lifting up two brand-new oars which had been leaning against the wall.

'Oh, they are beauties!' Michael said admiringly, sliding his hand up and down the smooth blade. 'They 're just the right size too.'

'How on earth did they know the size?' Sally asked, and Fred grinned:

'Oh, the police have a good many ways of finding out things.'

They all laughed.

'We 'd better think twice before we commit a crime,' Pat said, and Fred answered:

'That you had! And I must make my way home now. Good night.'

'Good night,' they answered, and he went off over the field, whistling, while they carefully carried the new oars into the dining-room.

'Poor old house. Doesn't it look damp?' Michael said.

The moon was shining in, and with the carpets rolled away, and the furniture all topsyturvy, it certainly did look derelict.

'Let's light a fire,' Sally suggested.

'Aren't we going to bed?'

'No. It's our last night like this. Let's stay up a bit. We'll clean up in the morning.'

'Yes, do. Oh, do let's!' Pat said.

They soon had a fire going and were sitting round it. They talked little, each being busy with his or her thoughts. But at length Michael said:

'I didn't know it could be so marvellous to be alive. I think we ought to make a pact.'

'What's that?' Pat asked.

'Well, a sort of oath.'

'Yes. What shall we make it of?' Sally said.

They all thought. Then Pat said:

'Let's make it always to remember the island. I know that sounds silly because, of course, we will, but——'

'I know what you mean,' Michael and Sally said together, and Sally went on:

'Even when we're old and hoary, we'll think of it and talk about it and—well—just remember it.'

'That's what I meant,' Pat said, and they drank to it in cocoa.

Then Michael passed round a safety-pin and they pricked their arms until a drop of blood came out which they smeared on a piece of paper.

'We'll put it in a bottle,' Michael said, 'and to-morrow—I know, listen! We'll bury it at low tide where Rob the smuggler buried his corpse.'

'I say! Every one!' Sally suddenly burst in. 'Do you realize? By low tide to-morrow Dad and Mum will be here.'

There was a burst of conversation.

'Think what we 'll have to tell them,' Michael said, and Pat asked:

'What time will they be here, Sall? What train are they coming on?'

'I don't know,' she answered. 'You know what they are. They never decide 'til the last moment.'

'Oh, it will be lovely. I hadn't realized. Sall, do let 's get the house spick and span.'

'Yes, we simply must,' Michael said. 'Let 's get up early and work like mad.'

'Well, we must go to bed now, then. Come on.'

She pushed the embers of the fire right back and put the guard in front. Then they went upstairs.

'Do just come out on the balcony,' Michael called when they were in their rooms; 'the moon is all over the harbour.'

They went out. A moonlit world was before them, with ribbons of shining water winding through the marshes, and far away the broad basin of the harbour.

'The Old Man would like this,' Sally said quietly.

'Do you know,' Pat said, 'when The Old Man dies, I believe he 'll still go and sit on his bench when the weather is fair.'

'He belongs here,' Michael said. 'The island will be different when he dies. But he's only seventy-five.'

Suddenly a nearby owl hooted loudly, making them jump. It hooted again with a twiddle at the end:

'Tw-whoo-oo-ootlety-om-pom-pom!'

The children put their hands to their mouths, and a wild discord of owl notes echoed through the dark.

'It's Dad! It's Dad!' screamed Pat, and, turning, the three ran helter-skelter through the room, down the stairs, and out of doors into the lane.

They met their parents half-way down, and were

over them like puppies, hugging them and shouting questions without waiting for answers, picking up the luggage and putting it down again, and hanging on to their arms, until they had to pause for breath.

'Hush!' said Mrs. Grange. 'We'll wake the neighbours!'

This was an old joke and was followed by a roar of laughter.

'We have woken them now, so that's all right,' said Mr. Grange, and, picking up the luggage, they started for home.

'How did you get here?' Michael said, and Sally burst in:

'Mummy, you are ridiculous to come at this time of night.'

'Did you have a good time?' Pat asked.

'Did you get your paintings done?'

'Was the train crowded?'

'Are you hungry?'

There was a chorus of questions. Mr. and Mrs. Grange tried vainly to answer them, or at least get in a question of their own.

'Well,' said Mrs. Grange, 'you're all here, that's one thing. Has no one been ill, or dead, or undernourished, or hurt or thrown into jail? In fact, have you had a good time?'

And the answers came pouring out:

'Yes.'

'Grand.'

'Absolutely marvellous.'

'Mummy, you can't think——'

Then Mr. Grange broke in:

'I say, but what *are* you all doing dressed at this hour?'

'Oh, we'll tell you all about it,' Sally said; 'but did you enjoy yourselves?'

'It was just heavenly, you really must come there with us some time,' Mrs. Grange said.

'Yes, we must. But so must you spend a holiday here.'

'Well, it's not so long to Christmas, and we'll be doing that.'

Michael let out a wild yell of joy.

'Michael! Whatever——?' Mrs. Grange began, but they only got the answer:

'Oh, we'll tell you all about it,' as they stepped into the house.

Mrs. Grange looked at the mess in astonishment, and laughed.

'And will you tell us all about this too?' she asked.

'There was a terrific storm and the tide came in and we nearly drowned,' Pat said.

'Pat, don't exaggerate!' came from Michael and Sally together, and Michael said:

'Come on, Dad and Mum. Come and look at the harbour from the balcony.'

They all stood looking out. Then Mr. Grange said:

'Look here, this can't be just a holiday house. This is where we're going to live. We'll get rid of the flat and I'll go up to town when I have to.'

There was a pause while the children pinched themselves to see whether they were dreaming, and then from the bottom of their hearts they answered:

'Good!'

In the two days that were left they all set to work, and cleaned and tidied the house. Then the children took their parents to see The Old Man, and Pete, and Mr. Potts and Fred, and, finally, they left their London address at the village post office, so that any letters could be forwarded, and then Mr. Carter came to take them to the station. He said to Sally, who was sitting in front, that he could not be sure they

would catch their train, but they did; they waited five minutes on the platform before the train even came in sight.

Three days later Sally, Michael, and Pat were sitting in Michael's tiny cupboard bedroom in their Kensington flat. The rain streamed down the window, and Michael's trunk stood in the hall, waiting to go off next day. Sally and Pat also started school on the next day, but they went to a day school, so had no trunks.

'This is rather like the caravan,' said Pat. 'I mean the way we all have to squadge up to get in at all.'

'Yes. You know, I feel we ought to do son ething about that pact,' Sally answered.

Michael made a noise like:

'Ooah we 'i'.'

'What?'

He made a vicious sweep round his mouth with his tongue.

'Sorry, piece of toffee stuck. We did. We buried the bottle.'

They had done this on the last morning. Mr. and Mrs. Grange had signed also, not in blood, but in pencil, showing that they were honorary members.

'Yes, but something more, I mean——'

Sally's idea was vague; she was not sure what she meant.

'Um?'

'Well, couldn't we make a record of the holiday, or something?'

'Oh, yes. It would be fun!' said Pat, bouncing on Michael's bed. 'How shall we do it?'

A fierce discussion followed, in which every one talked and no one listened. There was a bang on the wall, and they quietened: their father was working



next door. Michael took advantage of the silence to put forward his suggestion:

'What about next holidays going round all the places and getting photographs, and get one of Pete and The Old Man and *Silent*, and make a sort of picture-story, writing a bit under each picture?'

They discussed this idea. It seemed quite good, but there were various objections.

'We don't want to wait 'til next hols,' Pat said.

'And it will cost a lot. We'd have to have oceans of films.'

'But if we don't wait 'til next hols, I can't be in it,' Michael said. 'At least, I'll only be here for half-term.'

'Well, we must jolly well think of some way to do it so that we can divide the work.'

There was silence.

'We could write a book, I suppose,' Sally said, 'and all do different chapters.'

But the others did not really agree. It would be so scrappy.

'And, anyway, I always get stuck if I try to write,' said Michael, 'and Pat spells everything wrong.'

Again they thought. At last it looked as if Michael really had got an idea.

'Wait!' he said. 'Wait, I've got it.'

'We are waiting,' Sally said, after some time; 'but if you don't hurry up we'll all be back at school.'

'All right. We ought to have a sort of book exhibition. Have a written record and make models, like one of *Silent*, and one of the sheds, and all that sort of thing.'

'Yes, and we could have a large map showing where everything happened,' Sally suggested.

'And a plan of the house,' Pat said.

This seemed to be good, and they started to discuss details.

'It seems pretty obvious that Michael does the models. Pat and I couldn't make a decent one of *Silent* to save our lives,' Sally said, and Pat added:

'He'd better do the maps too.'

'Yes, and we'll write the record. I'll do all the stuff from my note-book about the animals and birds, and you can do the things like Michael nearly drowning, and chasing the smugglers, and the high tide. I'll go over the spelling when you've done it in rough.'

'I say, that's grand,' said Pat; 'and we could use Michael's idea by getting a few snapshots at Christmas.'

'Yes, and what about getting specimens?' Michael suggested.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, a stone off the shore, and bird feathers to show the different kinds of birds.'

'And a bottle of creek water,' Sally added, 'and the letter from the police, and the news-cutting about us.'

'I know,' Michael said. 'Dad can do some illustrations.'

'Yes! Oo yes! We *must* have that!'

'Let's ask him,' Pat said.

'We can't now. He's busy,' Sally answered.

'He's only got that woman he's painting.'

'Which woman?' Michael asked.

'The one who says: "Oh, vaas! Aid be soa glaird if you could, Mr. Gra-inge."'

Pat imitated her well and they laughed.

'Poor Dad. Let's knock him up,' said Michael.

'We'd better not.'

'Oh, come on. It's the last day before school.'

They took in a breath and yelled:

'Dad!'

There was silence from behind the wall.

'That's torn it,' said Michael, but then their father called back:

'Hallo, what do you want?'

'Will you illustrate our book?'

'What?'

'WILL YOU ILLUSTRATE OUR BOOK?'

The studio door clicked and their father came round.

'I say, you *must* shut up,' he said, and then, lowering his voice: 'I've got "Oh, yaas" next door.'

They giggled and whispered:

'Will you illustrate our book?'

'Which book?'

'A book we're going to write about the holidays.'

'Well! What do you think my time is for? If I illustrate every book——'

'Do!' they pleaded.

'Really, you don't seem to understand I'm slaving away trying to get the family's bread and butter, and——'

'Do.'

Mr. Grange groaned in mock despair.

'All right. That's if you'll be quiet all the rest of the evening.'

They jumped up, shouting:

'Oh, you are a dear!'

'Good old Dad!'

And Pat began to sing loudly:

'Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the——'

'Shut up!' said Mr. Grange. '"Oh, yaas" will think I keep a menagerie in here.'

There was a voice from behind as Mrs. Grange came along the passage.

'What *do* you think you're doing, George? And you others? Listen, I've had a letter from Pete, and he suggests that, if Michael likes, he'll take him on to work at the yards over the Christmas holidays.'

This time there were shrieks and yells from the

children, and round Mrs. Grange was a complete hubbub as every one tried to read the letter at once.

Mr. Grange retired to the studio, holding his head in his hands. The noise died down.

'That settles it,' Michael said. 'I'm not going to be a clarinet player, or an architect, or a mathematician. I'm going in for shipbuilding.'

'We ought to write at once,' said Sally.

'Oh, Mum, can't we wire? He'll have taken on someone else if we stop to write,' Michael urged.

Mrs. Grange smiled.

'Well, I don't think he's in quite such a hurry, but we'll wire, if you like. No, why don't we telephone?'

They rushed along to the telephone and Sally seized the receiver.

'No, it's my show. Let me,' Michael said.

'Here, no fighting. I'll get on and you can each have a word.'

Mrs. Grange waited after getting 'trunks,' and giving the number. Then the bell rang at the far end.

'There you are, Michael.'

'Hallo, hallo,' he said excitedly. 'Is that you, Pete? This is Michael. I say, can I really? I'd simply love to.—Yes, I sav, do you think I'd be any good at that sort of thing? Do you, honestly? Oh, cheers! I say, Sally's here.'

He passed the receiver to Sally.

'Hallo, Pete, this is Sally. Did you look up those slimy things with beards I showed you?—Well, no. I don't think so.—No, they were brown and green. It doesn't matter, we've got a nature encyclopaedia at school. I'll try there.—Yes, thanks. Pat wants to speak.'

'Hallo, Pete.—Don't be silly, of course I can

telephone.—Oh, shut up! Listen, we're writing a book about the holidays.—Yes, I know, but it's not three minutes yet. I say, will you give our loves to The Old Man and tell him we'll be there.—Oh, help, the pips. Good-bye!

She put the receiver down.

'Come on, every one, supper,' said Mrs. Grange, as Mr. Grange saw 'Oh, yaas' out of the door.

It was a custom with the Grange family to drink a toast on the last night of the holidays and, as usual, a bottle of claret stood on the table.

'Come on, Dad, help it out,' Michael said, fingering the cork.

'Michael, you don't "help out" claret. Now—are you all ready? What shall we drink?'

'They thought.

'Next holidays?' Mrs. Grange suggested.

'Next holidays!' they shouted happily, clinking their glasses over the table.

'Ugh!' said Pat in the silence that followed. 'I never *did* like whisky.'